



## NAKED SHINGLES

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

POETRY

*Saffron and Gold, and other Poems*

*Altar of Flowers*

*Catguts*

*Brief Orisons*

CRITICISM

*Venkataramani : Writer and Thinker*

# NAKED SHINGLES

*Short Stories by*

**MANJERI S. ISVARAN**

*With an Introduction by*

**K. S. VENKATARAMANI**

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## INTRODUCTION

*By*

K. S. VENKATARAMANI

### I

IS Indian Renaissance becoming a feeble squall—more gusts of wind than nourishing drops of rain?

Is the ferment that failed even in the strenuous days of Asoka, Akbar, and Sivaji—is it failing again at the most critical hour of our life?

Why?

Political ferment is but the travail for the birth of a higher life. No stir of the national life will lead to permanent gain unless it touches the cultural foundations. Therefore production of ideas is a basic industry in renascent times.

## II

The essence of creative art is its intimate relationship to life. Art is nourished in the womb of experience. *Svanubhava* is the basis of creative art. The silkworm produces silk from its mouth by a mysterious process of its own.

But all these vital conditions of the higher life are against us today. There is no sincerity ; there is no authentic desire for *svanubhava* ; there is no *yoga* ; there is no creative art. There is not the real golden touch at the tip of our pen, though it looks dainty, Parker-made and Swan-fed.

The ultimate aim of political action is to protect, build up culture, and rear a palace with many mansions to the Spirit of Man. Political structure is like scaffolding to a new building. But today, owing to a tilt in the axis of our life, all political action serves only as a scaffold to our culture.

## III

When I was dreaming these dreams of the aches of modern life, hectic and helpless, like a

worm in motion moved by the tidal lure of the moon, *Naked Shingles* was placed in my hands by Mr Manjeri S. Isvaran with a wish for a foreword from me. I felt the joy of a father celebrating his own son's wedding, and I was soon plunged in the festive atmosphere of *Naked Shingles*—all attar of roses and sandalwood and flowers and fruits, all saffron and gold, song and music in the auspicious hour.

#### IV

Our civilization tries to reduce everything to tabloid form. The short story is creative art in tabloid form, for convenient use in travel. It is a difficult art. But like all difficult arts, it tolerates a wide variety of performance. Therefore all over the world, the short story has become, like mangoes in pickle, edible in all stages, from the juicy raw to the rotten pulpy. And in India, everything is a short story, inclusive of our average life. It has become a residuary art, like the practice of Law, the unemployed and unemployable, moving, shoaling, and frisking in shallow waters.

In such a state of affairs, a book of short

stories is always welcome, to see if the dawn is near. *Naked Shingles* marks an epoch in Indo-anglian literature and in Indian creative art. It plumbs life, taken at random, at its most succulent points, and the incision carries no bandage and leaves no scar. The art is embalmed in poetic feeling and preserved in the amber of creative prose.

## V

When I delivered in 1933 a course of special lectures at the Benares Hindu University, I said that creative art was still perfecting an instrument of expression to suit the increasing purpose of the century, an instrument which has the fluidity of prose—not the deathmarks of Matthew Arnold's definition—and the suggestiveness and the soul-force of poetry. This new vehicle of expression will be to creative art what the *Veena* is to music. Our aching world of strife and sorrow requires such a flute to still us into harmony through the subliming force of *Nadabrahma*.

Mr Isvaran is one of the pioneers of this emergence. His art is unique. Both in form

and content it is a new type. It obeys no conventions, not even those of the land of his birth. His art is anarchical and futurist according to conventional standards. But it has the pulse of true life as it obeys an inner discipline of its own. Still strangely, he prefers for a drive an ancient palanquin to the modern bus.

Mr Isvaran strives for a higher harmony through a cross fertilization between prose and poetry. The aim is the happy progeny of creative prose—not prose poetry. The marks of commercial prose so lucidly outlined in Matthew Arnold's definition are the real dead marks of creative prose. Mr Isvaran realises this intimately.

Mr Isvaran is essentially a poet, but his temperament and urges of renascent India make him a storyteller. When a poet becomes a storyteller, the chances are that poetic gifts lie in the story like nuggets of gold in river sand, untouched by the craftsmanship of the storyteller. Generally, the gifts of the poet and the storyteller lie apart. At best it is only a sweet embrace. But in Mr Isvaran's art, there is a fusion of the gifts and the result is integral. We

heights without fatigue and witness the freshness and panorama of a higher altitude.

But Mr Isvaran's art is essentially realistic, though enveloped in mists of idealism—the cloud sucks sedulously its moisture, not from a swamp or a meandering stream but from the limitless sea.

In the making of Mr Isvaran's short story, what is the secret flux that rings the change, the alchemy that converts? The cackle of human speech gets frozen in the high altitudes of Mr Isvaran's art. But the suppressed voice heightens the speechless glint in the eye. The eloquent tale is told. The character lives.

Intense pictorial and poetical description of a fundamental attitude to life serves as the vehicle of evolution. The wooden mechanism of the dialogue is deliberately thrown away. The effect is startling and new, as in a change of travel from the S.I.R. to the Imperial Airways. The wonder is that often a stranger word fertilizes itself into a pearl and sheds a hidden illumination on the whole passage and makes the oyster itself precious.

Mr Isvaran's diction is remarkable. He covers the widest range of words and even giants

and outlaws are often skilfully shaped and presented artistically as *Dvarapalakas* who give us the preliminary tremor of the sacred shrine.

Sensuousness there is in every line and word of *Naked Shingles*, as there is granite smoothness in every pebble in the bed of a hill-stream ; as there is grace and gleam in the true Feminine in all her moods. There is colour and refinement in every touch. Like mist on high ranges of hills, there is also a floating wistfulness in all his stories from "Merry-Go-Round" to "The Cradle." All the stories keep to a high level in aim and execution, but I like best "The War Memorial." It has a haunting charm for me in spite of its hackneyed title. It reflects the deepest moods and moments of life. "Jowramma" would have taken with me the first rank. But the return to domesticity of "Jowramma"—a beautiful name and theme—is an unreal tailpiece of sentimental idealism that does not happen in life. Even if it happens, art ignores such gross realism. Jowramma's return is a pleasing illusion like Ramu's Utopia in my own *Murugan, The Tiller*.

Everywhere in *Naked Shingles*, we feel the



touch of the poet. The touch is true to life. Only the angle of touch is not that of the normal but of a lonely lyric. But the idealism is nourished from the real ; it is not a heavy pall of smoke, but jets of steam distilled from the pure waters of life.

In *Naked Shingles*, we slip into a fullblown flower garden, often heavy perfumes, in the blooming hour ; and we see too few of the leaves, much less withered leaves anywhere.

In *Naked Shingles*, every word shows precious nurture. Every word is saturated with life. Every word is further treated with a special luminous gum, the silkworm's own, which gives it a stellar phosphorescence.

The change for a rupee is gold, and there is no copper at all in the Manjeri marketplace.

*Naked Shingles* gave me an afternoon of unbroken fluid joy. My grateful thanks to Mr Isvaran. May God speed him, he is still young, in this glorious work of making a New India !

*Mylapore, Madras*

*June 25, 1941*

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AFFECTIONATELY DEDICATED TO  
MY MOTHER

9111

## I

“ONE more dram,” he said, smacking his lips, and his eyes glanced merrily through the glass tumbler he held in his extended hand. That was his sixth tippie and the shop-keeper came forward, walking like a kangaroo, and poured out the bright arak.

The drinker was a man about forty, neatly dressed in a *dhoti* and shirt, silk cloth of the colour of the sunset cloud thrown over his shoulders, his partly bald head appearing like the moon in penumbra, his nose riding superbly over to a handful of bristling black moustache. One sharp quaff, elbow upward, and he thumped

the glass on the table, his left hand meanwhile pulling a purse out of his pocket. He chinked out two careless rupees and the arakseller paid him back a balance of five annas.

Ratnam walked out of the shop ; naturally Ratnam skipped on a light fantastic toe, for a humming-bird hopped, fluttered, and preened in the green garden of his heart, smiling beautifully, sure that the world was smiling at him.

Out on the road he joined his wife and son. Mangi was a cubistic female, all harsh lines and angles and no flesh, with a look that betrayed how unexpectedly the sap of her life had turned bitter. She had known the thrill of being a mother nine years ago ; she had hoped for a few more returns of the thrill but her deeper waters in their brimming time had suddenly gone dry ; she had to be content with an only son.

At the sight of her husband coming frisking along, her heart turned into a little hibiscus of anger flushing her face with some of its unseen redness.

"You promised you would not do it to-day," she said, controlling her feelings with

great effort. It was four o' clock in the evening and the sun still very hot, but he was in a world of dews and moonbeams. And his words were cool as the dew and mellow as the moon, which effect he achieved by his silence.

"Shame!" she cried, a little louder than she intended; "and when you know that our boy is coming with us. More shame, when you are going to a festival in the temple."

"It's only a drop," he lisped, and she knew the implication of that drop. "And when a friend asks, how can one refuse?" he said supplementing, and as though that would mitigate her harshness.

"Friends! You pay for their pots!"

"That's my business."

"It's my business to see that you don't."

"Shut up!"

"Remember we are not in our house. So disorderly! So disgraceful!"

"Shut up!" he shouted again, and embellishing his vehemence: "you dirty whore, you'll be merry and bouncing as a widow."

That marked the climax and conclusion of the quarrel, that was the flowery mode in which

Ratnam always clinched all arguments between himself and his wife.

It was nearly a mile from where they stood to the temple, the place of the nine days' festival; that day was the most gala day of all, drawing storms of humanity to see its glory. Images of sixty-three saints were taken in procession along the streets skirting the shrine, and it was the time when the saints saw how beautiful were the daughters of sinners and cursed themselves for their metalness which no fragrance of flesh and blood, no bright laughter of lips, no cool caress of lids could quicken to the vivid joys of life. That day, man made god in his own image; gay, debonair, light of heart and of heel, and went about wildly exultant of his power to touch, kindle, and transform. And through touch he reached the Promised Land that was wantonly shut upon him.

Early that morning Ratnam had left his wife telling her that he was going on business and that if he failed to show himself for the mid-day meal, she was to close down the shop and come with their son to the Firewood Depot where he would be waiting for them to proceed

to the festival. She knew the place well and its mention had disturbed her, for the very air hereabouts was bacchanalian. And she had asked her husband to abstain, for god's sake, from his usual bout to which he had tartly replied that he knew what was best for himself. She had used coaxing words next applying the sari to her eyes, and he had half-heartedly acceded. And now, what an outrage! He came with that detestable smell on his lips; only a drop with the cronies, he said, and tended to grow as inarticulate as a child.

Husband, wife, and son plodded on unconsciously that they were infinitesimal drops in that human cornucopia; the wife walked close by her man, almost brushing him, and sickening with the thought of why she was going with him at all. The boy kept his pace a few yards ahead of them.

"How were the sales this morning?" he asked, suddenly breaking his sullenness.

And she too, feeling that although silence was the stern voice of anger, its eloquence was lost upon him in his present state, said:—

"Sales indeed! Even the wretched pie



and quarteranna customers, little boys and girls who want a peppermint, a pinch of jaggery, a grain of fried gram free for their miserable purchase were few to-day." Her mind reverted to the time when the small grocer's shop with its addition of rows of aerated water bottles, betel, arecanuts, tobacco, bunches of plantain fruits, newspapers and magazines hanging on a string in silent pyrotechnic display was a large provision store with stock-in-trade of a different kind and value. It had shrunk to its present shape because of the company her husband kept of the gambling mind he had outrageously developed. Her thrift alone had saved them from complete ruin; and although it mortified her to play the role of a saleswoman when her husband was out, she was brave and showed that she could be as reserved in her penury as she was in her opulence.

"Wretched pie customers!" he echoed, in a tone that was becoming more and more liquid as the road he walked grew correspondingly lighter to his tread. "Pies make annas, annas make rupees, and why call pies wretched?"

"What wonderful wisdom! You had

rupee, ten-rupee, a hundred-rupee once. And had you been as wise

He was crestfallen at this moment then suddenly cocking a belligerent eye at her : "What are you driving at

"To put a stop to your extravagance in living," she said with increasing emphasis. "The house is under mortgage, one by one the rooms will have either been sold or gone to the auctioneer. And I don't know how long the money will last. I have pleaded to you in vain. You have not moved your heart. And the idle neighbours talk is more than I can stand."

"Neighbours ! Filthy dogs ! They are as filthy as you are. And you are as filthy as they," she said with breath coming in gusts. "I am my own master and here he thumped his chest—defiantly. He would not stand any woman's nonsense."

The boy looked back. Mangamma's eyes were opened for a sharp retort close at hand. A wound inside her opened instantaneously and bled excruciatingly.

Ratnam, his own master at last, stood up and soared in his masterdom. The journey was continued in silence.

rupee, ten-rupee, a hundred-rupee customers once. And had you been as wise then ! ”

He was crestfallen at this mocking retort ; then suddenly cocking a belligerent eye on her : “ What are you driving at ? ”

“ To put a stop to your wild ways of living,” she said with increasing heat. “ The house is under mortgage, one by one my jewels have either been sold or gone to the pawnbroker. And I don’t know how long the shop is going to last. I have pleaded to you in vain, my tears have not moved your heart. And what the neighbours talk is more than I can bear.”

“ Neighbours ! Filthy dogs and bitches ! And you are as filthy as they,” he cried, his breath coming in gusts. “ I am my own master—and here he thumped his chest—and I won’t stand any woman’s nonsense.”

The boy looked back. Mangi’s lips which were opened for a sharp retort closed instantly ; a wound inside her opened instead and bled excruciatingly.

Ratnam, his own master that he was, soared in his masterdom. The rest of the journey was continued in silence.

## II

Vivid, hectic was the scene that opened before their eyes ; picturesque the many stalls and booths ; endless the clack of rattles, the ting of handbells, the tumult and the shouting of men. The long stonesteps of the tank in the square where the four broad roads met glinted like rainbow ribbons, ever undulating—so densely were they packed with gaily-clad humanity—and the water in the tank though generally stagnant heard the mirth and laughter around and wrinkled in joyful harmony. The pagoda of the temple behind, rose like a yogin's dream, a fabric that was god, a pattern to frown at the brokenness of man. The sun had set and the twilight seemed to touch the restless scene with a mystery that made it indescribably vague and magical.

The hour was near when the saints were to move in stately pageant. Music sounded, the braying long pipes, the crooning short pipes, the tinkling cymbals, the bang and rub-a-dub of drums, the gurgling splash of tambourines—those crude little instruments with thin parchment

stretched tight over circular frames of burnt clay bought for a few pies and beat by urchins ; music sounded from all nooks and corners, melting, condensing, and mounting up in an untrammelled mass and breaking away in bits of thunder. The motley crowd seethed and simmered, buzzed and bubbled like a witch's brew, exquisite not sinister, and in that deepening dark of sweaty warmth and voluptuousness, the clods of men and women flowered with a dark, impersonal beauty—real pagan flowers amid that glamorous bewilderment burning with glimpses of the uttermost night, of reckless drinking and debauch on earth, as incandescent as the night-life of the gods in heaven, and the gods not to be outvied by mortals descending to their midst and secretly participating.

Ratnam walked by his wife, sullen and remote in this intimate prospect of life, while she directed the gaze of her son to this stall and that, purchasing sweetmeats, giving him the luxury of a peer through the stereoscope to see the many amazing scenes the showman vigorously ringing a handbell called aloud to see, and stopping to hear the Punjab band playing a

military tune before a touring cinema tent. But it was when approaching the highfliers and roundabouts of horses, cradles, and elephants whirling under multicoloured awnings that the boy's delight burst out with a clap of hands and a gasping exclamation ; even Ratnam was moved to smile and talk something bright in spite of the heaviness of his tongue.

"Which do you want," he asked his son, "the one with the cradles or that with the horses?"

"That with the horses," came the instant reply.

From the centre of the pleasure-machine, a man with a hand resting on the revolving shaft called out lustily :—

"Who rides? Who rides? Five minutes' ride for three pies!"

There was a sudden scramble ; Ratnam dumped his son on a horse and reeled back ; and soon when all the horses were filled—some of them had two riders—the machine started to move.

Slowly at first, rocking to and fro, buoying up and down, and then in a widening, ever-

widening whirl, the horses rose and fell, thundered on silent hoofs in the air, careered wildly into the void, their wooden shanks taut between the legs of their riders, their wooden mouths unrestrained by the snaffle-bit. Whirr! Whirr-r-r-r! Horses and riders vanished in the glory of rapid gyration; the earth seemed to have narrowed into a magic merry-go-round, revolving in its axle for the sheer joy of it.

Splash! It was a violent clap of hands rising above the noise nearabout, and all eyes turned to where it came from.

Ratnam stood gazing at the whirling merry-go-round, gesticulating wildly, his eyes glowing with an uncanny light. "Look, it's Muntaz, it's Muntaz!" he cried. "I've made the unerring pick this time . . . Tips! What tips! I knew her for a winner . . . she flies . . . she shoots like an arrow . . . Jasmine . . . Rashid . . . Zohal . . . they are falling behind . . . look! this is the third round . . . third round . . . third round . . . she's still ahead . . . hey Ghouse my friend, our fortune is made . . . but . . . but . . . what's this . . . Rashid dashing up . . . dashing up . . . dashing up . . . am I going blind . . . blast that

sound of the rupees . . . Rashid . . . Rashid . . . just one head . . . oh I'm ruined . . . ruined . . . I . . . I . . . " There was a dull thud and Ratnam lay on the ground clutching his throat and kicking his legs wildly in the air.

Mangi who stood near by strangely fascinated by the behaviour of her husband, dropped on her knees and tried to lift him, but he lay clumsily, his hands asprawl and one of his legs gone twisted about the wooden post of a stall. Froth was on his lips, his eyeballs seemed to jump out in crimson protrusion, and his chest heaved and fell as if endeavouring to root out the ribs. Horror kept her dumb for a moment ; she knew not that it was she who was sobbing in pain and shame ; then when awareness of her plight dawned suddenly on her, she rose to her feet and called her son. Meanwhile the hobby-horses had slowed, the man revolving the machine having heard strange shouts and seen people pressing toward a fallen object. The boy clung to his mother in fear and wonder ; he saw her crying which caused him to cry too and vaguely understand that something had happened to his father.



"Keep back, keep back," said now a couple of men elbowing their way, and lifting the unconscious Ratnam bore him through the crowd. At the farther end of the road they put him into a jutka ; the wife was too shaken to express her gratitude.

The jutka started.

From far away came the sound of pipes and drums, a tumult like surf breaking on the reef, which told that the sixty-three saints were moving in stately pageant.

The jutka jolted ; Ratnam uttered low groans, and when he ceased to groan talked the language of the turf and the names of horses with their pedigree. He heard the melodious cascade of streaming silver behind the grills ; he stood in feverish expectancy in the enclosure ; all the world was a racecourse to him. It sickened Mangi's heart to hear him raving ; she knew that he had lost heavily in the races the last three months ; the drink and the excitement had made him forget himself to behave as he liked. The whirl of the roundabout had changed into a race for him and its wooden hobby-horses into fleet-footed steeds !

### III

Ratnam did not survive the attack of *delirium tremens*. His talk was horsey to the last of his breath ; he had run his last race and lost.

Some days after his funeral her son asked Mangi :—

“Why was father always talking about horses, mother ?”

“You won’t understand, dear. He loved them so much.”

“If he loved them so much why did he not keep any with him ?” The boy had ceased to go to school, he liked to be in the shop always with his mother, and question her about his father.

“Horses brought him money.”

“How ?”

“They run horses. Oh, oh, you won’t understand, my son.”

“They ! Who runs horses ? Tell me, mother dear, I must know.”

“They run horses and when one horse runs faster than the others and reaches a place

first they give money to him who has bet on that horse."

"What is betting, mother?"

She was silent.

"And so father got much money."

She turned away her head to hide a turbulent tear.

"I too would bet—"

"Ah! don't say that, my child, don't say that," she almost shrieked, and her anguish was so stark that it awed him into silence and seemed to give him in a flash the clue to the death of his father. A moment after, he was weeping brokenly on her breast, with the knowledge she had made him apprehend in some strange medi-umistic way, of the misery that man passes on to man.

## I

THE day had begun clear and bright but before noon the sun fell; shadows raced like steeds, dimpled in rings, and dissolved in hillslope, meadow, and valley; from beyond the greys and quiet greens of silver oaks and eucalypti a mist thin as muslin rose and moved on gathering speed and thickness. Soon the countryside was in a huge cloudage of fog; heaven and earth had blended in radiant obscurity.

From somewhere a sound came startling the silence; it swelled, it was the electric horn mooing the hour of twelve. The fog which had begun to lift awhile ago cleared away

AM-pletely when the mooing ceased ; churches  
steeples tapered into the sky again ; and trees  
shed their opals enriching every dip and dingle  
every hole and hummock in the earth ; and  
meadows lay freshened and humming in the  
emeraldness.

On a tract of land in Kodapamund where  
Kelso Road takes a sharp ascent, the fog lifted  
revealed a man digging potatoes. He was thirty  
five or thereabouts ; had a body sturdy enough  
to give the earth his warm sweat to drink.  
He was clad in a coarse kind of cloth which reached  
down to his knees ; a blue woollen coat which  
had once reposed on a patrician back protected  
him from the cold ; his head was encased in a  
heavy turban. From early dawn he had been  
working in his farm. He had manured the  
cabbage and cauliflower—hen and horse-droppings  
were splashed on this part of the  
cultivation ; and he was now digging the potatoes.  
When the electric horn mooed he stopped  
digging, straightened himself, and glanced at the  
half-filled sack standing near him. His eyes  
beamed satisfaction for two days hence was the  
market day. He placed the shovel aside, spread

an empty sack on the ground, and sat on it sighing relief. He then proceeded to flick off the clods of earth that had settled on his body, his face taking on a musing look—"these potatoes are the best and biggest of the season, I may sell them at four annas a *viss* ; twelve annas a pair for the cauliflower ; and milk, I shall certainly cut it from five to three bottles for a rupee"—and suddenly checking his imaginative flight, turned his head round. The movement was quick and denoted intense awareness ; his gaze encountered the picture he had been nebulously forming in his mind (he was not entirely absorbed in business calculations) : first the face and soft bright eyes and then the bosom animating into a full-length woman and emerging from the valley below. She was in her early twenties, small-made, prettyish, full of that lush muliebrity commonly found in hillgirls ; she carried on her head an earthen pot. Now balancing on a ridge, now leaping over a breach, she walked nimbly and gracefully, so like a dryad except for the earthen pot, and was soon by the side of the man. She laid down the pot and while stooping, the end of her sari covering her head slid

to her shoulders revealing rich dark hair, richer with oil. She adjusted her dress and stood in silence.

The man took the pot in his hands and gently shaking it for a minute began to drink from it. Between mouthfuls he lifted his eyes and looked at the woman who for some reason seemed to avoid his gaze. He put down the pot, wiped the rice of the gruel sticking to his lips by the back of his hand, coughed deeply and spoke the dialect in Canarese : "Nothing to tell me?"

"I've told all," the woman replied, and though her tone was gentle there was a note of pettishness in it. She still did not meet his eyes, lapsed into silence again, fingering her necklet of blue beads and tracing diagrams on the earth with a toe.

"Told all!" the man repeated, "told your folly. I'm not the one to stand it." He felt that his anger was being wilfully roused.

"I'm not going away from you for ever. I've not left you for a moment these seven long years. Why not listen to reason?" Her voice was pleading, and sure that it would mollify him

she cast her timid eyes on him. But she only met a face in which anger was rising rapidly.

"You may leave me for ever!" he said in quick acerbity. "Those people have put madness into your head. And you are asking me to listen to reason."

"Yes, for the last three years, but you have not. They are nice people and I am going with them."

"You dare not!" He jumped to his feet and catching hold of her wrists was about to slap her cheek, but something in the limpid splendour of her eyes prevented him from doing so. He fell two steps back and regarded her with awe and faint aversion.

"That decides it then," she said, panting for breath; "nothing can shake my will."

"Who'll look after the boy?"

For a moment she appeared to be troubled, but bracing herself up said: "I'm taking him away with me."

He was surprised at her calm downright-ness; wanted to crack her obstinate head with the shovel, but the picture of her as a gentle and obedient wife rose in his mind and he fought



down the foul fiend in him. Now she was past all reasoning, and she was accusing him for want of reason. Those townspeople had really perverted her, he thought, and his anger against them grew immeasurable. But they were Sirkar people and very rich ; he was only a poor fellow with a couple of cows and a little plot that the Sait had permitted him to cultivate as payment for minding his bungalow which lay untenanted for half of the year when the Secretariat moved back to Madras.

But no ; he will not allow anybody to take his wife away from his side for howsoever short a time. Keeping the decision firm within himself he fell to digging again. His wife watched him for a while, a smile and a frown alternating on her face, but finding that he was not going to be conciliatory, took the pot in which she had brought him his noonday meal and walking hurriedly, running almost, disappeared into the valley.

## II

Seven years ago Jowramma had come to Dotacamund as the wife of Mali. She was a

native of Mysore and had not visited the land of her birth even once since coming to the hills. The reason was that she had no relative there to pay a visit to ; her parents had died within a year of each other after her marriage, and the whereabouts of an only brother who had left home quarrelling with the father were not known. She loved her husband, was greatly devoted to him ; helping him cultivate the little plot of land, running a frugal house, and putting by small sums saved out of selling milk and vegetables. The cottage and the farm constituted her world ; in sun and shower the lives of the husband and wife had blossomed together into one flower, and the parent stem was richer now for the birth of a floweret. It was a boy.

The pair would have continued to be happy through fair weather and foul had not the gentleman with his wife and children arrived in Ootacamund, now three years ago, and returned every year after. He was an Assistant Secretary in the Revenue Department, and came to the hills with the Government of Madras which held its offices here when the year was the hottest in the City.

Jowramma became the servant of the officer's family during its temporary stay in that place. The officer's wife was a good woman, grown good through the yearly routine of domestic bearing; she liked Jowramma from the very first hour she engaged her services. Jowramma was an honest girl, she told her husband; for the scrubbing the floor and scouring vessels she had no equal. Their cook's work was next to nothing: he boiled the rice and more often overboiled it. Her unruly children were most docile in the maid's hands; Jowramma had a voice as sweet as civet to sweeten their sourness; and they were never so happy as when she took them to the garden of evenings, wandering by the pools thick with lilies and lotuses and by the hedges plashed with roses damasked red and white rigadooning in the wind, or climbing the waggon-shaped huts of the Todas to hear the queer women sing and see them wheeling in a fantastic dance. Why not take Jowramma with them to Madras? She was worth more than a hundred city servantgirls, most of them good and all unclean. No sooner had the idea formed in her mind than she expressed it to her husband.

who gave instant approval. But Jowramma was not a woman without home and husband to follow them at a mere wish. And when she informed Mali what the lady had expressed, he laughed and told her not to be foolish. "It's the way of the rich folk," he wound up, wrinkling his nose and sniffing.

In the second year of their stay the officer's wife began to tempt the simple hillgirl. The City was all sunshine and colour; here was nothing but fog and cold, fog and cold all the year round. Why not come to spaciousness and freedom? She will pay amply for her services; her husband may leave the farm and follow her; he too will be given a job, they wanted a gardener.

Jowramma heard the words of inducement as in a dream; the picture the lady drew was too dazzling to be true, too incredible to be believed. She was disturbed, her whole being vacillated. But no persuasion, no sweet temptings would shake Mali's heart. To leave the place where he was born, compact of its rains and mists and delicious airs, of its fruits that reddened in iridescent shadows! To leave

off his farm ! Pooh ! He would as well jump from the highest peak yonder and die in the valley. The red earth would be his bed and the mountain mist his shroud !

Jowramma went about sulky. A stranger up till now to any domestic rub, Mali felt very sad, but he hid his sadness in an impassive face. "Curse on the woman who tempts my wife so. Let her take another servant, my wife stays away," he said with terrible resolution.

But the officer's wife was not so easily to be browbeaten. Would not Jowramma come with her on a short visit to the City ? She shall return before her husband had hardly time to think of her absence. But once she managed this, the lady was sure that she could retain the maid.

Mali was furious. The mischief once set afoot had grown apace ; a gentle and obedient wife, a very miracle of mansuetude, had turned into an insurgent. Being by nature a kind man, he could not steel his heart against his wife and deal with her harshly ; he had infinite faith in her good nature asserting again. But he was deceived.

### III

The Assistant Secretary's wife was happy beyond words. Trunks, suitcases, beddings, and other *impedimenta* had already been sent to the station. She, her husband, and children were brightly dressed for the journey. There was only an hour more to start ; they were waiting for Jowramma.

Soon she joined them with her little boy. A small bundle, her modest belongings, was her only luggage. They told her how happy they were all to have her with them ; it was wise of her husband not to have raised the big stick to beat down her decision. She was a marvel.

Jowramma smiled gratefulness for their kind words ; for very joy she could not speak. But was it joy ?

The little covey set out to the railway station. Every yard that took her away from her home saddened Jowramma ; the night previous she had violently quarrelled with her husband ; his angry voice still rang in her ears. She bent over her boy sitting in her lap and kissed his eyes which were opened wide in

wonder at the ride ; the chatter of the other children was remote and had no meaning for her.

The station was reached, tickets were purchased. Jowramma with her boy on her hip stood in the little platform ; very soon the train would carry her away to the plains where she had never been before. She felt strange in the company, felt that the world of people in which she found herself was not hers. It began to drizzle and fog. Half an hour more and the train would steam away. A tremor was in her heart, a giddiness in her head, a hectic gleam in her eyes. She seemed to see her husband toiling lonely in the farm, in the cold wind and dense fog and pelting rain, cooking his food, tending the cows, lonely, desolate. And she saw him outlined against the immense toga of mist, moving from patch to patch, moving as it were along the margent of the world, the earth lying like a smoking mummy under a melancholy sky, with the trees rising naked and boughless and like spectres in a pale-grey waste ; and she saw his sad face looming large and unnatural, his eyes chiding her for her disobedience and desertion.

She stifled a sob in her throat whilst the t  
distilled deep in her heart, clasped her boy t  
to her bosom, and picking up the bundle n  
for the exit. And she called out in a faint v  
to those that were looking amazed at her  
haviour : " I am not coming ! "

The guard blew his whistle.

And all that was left of the train was  
trailing wreath of smoke under the platf  
roof.

The Assistant Secretary's wife was in  
towering rage ; she however found that th  
were bugs in the cushions of the first c  
compartment, and crushed they enraged  
more by their rancid buggy smell.

On the road to Kodapamund walked  
woman, with a child on her hip and a bundl  
her hand. She walked rapidly, seemed to s  
like a bird, seemed to have the heart of one.

#### IV

The mist had cleared away and the  
shone like a Koh-i-noor, pouring its chill brillia  
over hill and dale and meadow. The wind ,



hoydenish, caressing the boles, twirling the leaves, wimpling the waters, fluting, whistling, and laughing gossamer laughter at flowers that gleamed like flakes of icy fire.

In the little farm the man went on digging potatoes. He did not seem to be alert and buoyant as he was yesterday ; there was a weariness in his movements and the hands that dug were like the hands of a clock. A half-filled sack stood by his side ; ever and anon his eyes lighted on it listlessly.

The electric horn mooed the hour of twelve. The thinning fade-out of the sound seemed to produce a nostalgic effect upon him ; he rose from his bending posture, threw the shovel aside, and sat on the half-filled sack. He sighed, and by sheer force of habit turned round.

His eyes widened unwinking in astonishment. He saw his wife approaching him swiftly.

He rose up ; the shrunken features of his weatherbeaten face filled out with light and tenderness ; he clasped her impetuously to his breast and his voice in her ear rounded to the murmur of the wind.

"Why didn't you go ?" he asked.

"You know I would not," said she in a whisper, snuggling up against him, trembling half out of shame and half out of love.

He made no answer. Putting his hand softly under her chin he lifted her face and kissed her full on the mouth.

In his tight clasp she felt the strength and silence of the hills and trees around ; in the dew of her lips he tasted the sweet of life and the salt of the earth.

## BEGINNINGS

LOOK over the plywood partition that runs shoulder-high through the middle of the living room and follow what is going on in a most melodious little home.

Two girls, apparently of the same age—they might be five—bustled about animatedly whilst a boy, a year older, sat leaning on a pillar and watching them. Surely he was the most important person in the company, and though it was the privilege of his sex to be passive when he liked, he was not precocious enough to know it ; his eyes betrayed such sunny interest in the activity of the girls ; the state

was thrust upon him and he could join them only when asked to.

One corner was the kitchenette where were arranged neatly small cooking utensils of divers shapes, some of brass and some of smooth soap stone. A bit of coir like a tousled tuft of hair served the purpose of a broom, and while one girl swept the floor with it the other sprinkled water from an imaginary pitcher to quell the rising dust.

"Shall I bring you the fuel now?" asked the boy in a tone of impatience and rising.

"Not just yet, Jagu," said Girija, tilting her head and smiling. "We've to draw the *kolam*, cut the vegetables, wash the rice, and do a lot of things for cooking the meal. I'll tell you, dear, when it is time to fetch the fuel." With which she seated him again, stroking his back with the tenderness of a mother. Jagu was the endearing derivative of Jagadisan.

"Janaki," said she next to her partner in housekeeping, "have you taken out the brinjals and the cucumber piece from the basket?"

"Yes," replied that lady, whose eyes remained perpetually wide at some unseen and

unknowable wonder. She was all smiles and curves and dimples, a pretty little dove, with 'white doves for feet,' and voice hushed and cooing as a dove's. Her complexion was pure *thumba*-blossom. Her nose was slightly turned at the tip and it was her grievance, against whom she did not particularly know, when her mother said that she would not look beautiful with a nose-pearl. That ornament wanted a nose without any tilt and Janaki secretly hoped that her tilt would vanish one day.

Girija was cast in a different mould. Her features were exquisitely chiselled; bones and not flesh contributed to her symmetry, and she promised a more superb nubility. Her voice could silence the peal of silver bells, but it changed into a screech whenever her view was contradicted or she felt she was snubbed. She laughed her girlish laughter and wept her girlish tears with equal intensity. And her laughter sounded the sweetest, when she said to Jagu and Janaki: "Now both of you go to that room yonder while I bathe. And Janaki, you shall bathe after I have done."

The two vanished accordingly. Girija

looked around to assure herself that nobody was in sight ; then going to the wall performed the gesture of turning on a tap that was not there. She next stripped herself, folded the petticoat and laying it carefully aside, stood delicate as a lily in all its luminous nakedness. Suddenly, with a wriggle, she turned round and saw two pairs of eyes peering from the room opposite to her. She threw herself down crouching, much injured and abashed, and cried reproachingly : “ It’s very wicked of you to do that. I asked you not to look out.” The answer was a low gurgling laugh with two distinct airy notes in it, and before she could make a more vehement protest the gloom of the chamber had absorbed the inquisitive eyes.

She went through her bath in an elaborate manner, the little Pompadour, whistling softly while rubbing her limbs with the soap of her radiant fancy ; applied the unprepared turmeric paste to her delicate cheeks ; scolded the tap for dripping scanty water ; towelled her body and slid hastily into her petticoat. Then she gave her braided hair a smoothing which it needed not and called her friends.

They came out. It was her and Jagadisan's turn to be in the room next.

Janaki passed in an exact manner through the pantomime of bathing.

The girls agreed between themselves that Jagadisan showed symptoms of an approaching fever ; he was to wipe his body with the wet towel and on recovery he may bathe.

Cooking then began in right earnest. This lasted for about five minutes in the course of which a multitude of dishes was prepared. Curds, dholl, ghee, curries, and the puddings seasoned wonderfully stood in their proper places on and around the hearth. One girl peeped into the pot of rice and half-closed her eyes as if resisting the curling steam.

"Now I shall lay the silver plate of my husband and serve him food," said Janaki, looking at Jagadisan.

"What ! Whose husband did you say ?" snapped Girija.

"Mine, of course," whispered Janaki, pouting her lips. This meek little girl knew perfectly what she was saying.

"Yours !" gasped Girija. "He's *my* hus-

band, my mother told me so." With which she caught hold of the boy's hands and kissed his cheeks. Janaki came running, dropping the silver plate, and clasping Jagadisan's waist dragged him to her. Girija pinched her rival's arms and pinch was given for pinch. The boy freed himself from their clasp and the girls began to quarrel without further check, pecking at each other like birds, pulling the hair, clawing and snarling like vicious cats. Janaki had the worst of it, frailer of the two that she was, and she subsided into a fit of sobbing. At this Jagadisan came to her and throwing his arms round her neck said, looking at Girija: "You are a naughty girl and I don't like you."

Janaki smiled through her tears.

Girija stood like a little demon, her bosom heaving and the corners of her mouth puckering. But she did not cry; she stared at the boy and girl before her, saw them each close to the other, side on side, cheek to cheek, and if Janaki knew that there was anything called hate, it burnt, as hate never burnt yet, in Girija's eyes. Suddenly she turned her back on them and rushing to the kitchen corner kicked about the cooking utensils.



The brass things tinkled scattering and those of soapstone scratched white lines across the brick floor.

Her enemies were too amazed to laugh. They walked out slowly, whispering together and glancing furtively once behind.

Girija sat amid the toy vessels covering her face with her hands, lost in an abyss of forlornness. The golden home they were building had suddenly blanched lead ; through the thickening moisture in her eyes she saw everything a twilit blur ; felt like being in the womb where she had begun ; unalive but conscious of the rumblings of an imbecile world.

## SEASHELLS

SWIFTER than a weaver's shuttle the days had flown, faster than beads told by a holy man ; but Sorrow's foot is shod with lead and Time is not with her. And Syamala's days were heavy as lead and as lustreless.

Syamala ! Oh, mute is all music ! Syamala was beautiful; arms and neck of moonlit jasmine; hair, soft unbraided dusk ; but why should she be beautiful ? Her bosom did not throb with the warmth of life like the quickening bud in the sun ; the twin birds there, once crowding and clamorous in the wind of joy, fell apart and were hushed by a sudden calm. Fancies were

flogged down, fancies of a happy young wife ; her eyes were two great teardrops and held complete dominion of her face.

The little domesticities for the day over, Syamala sat in her room. Through the door she could see the kitchen lit from a corner by the crimson heart of the oven ; the vessels sparkling clean on the shelves, and the spoons and ladles hanging down the loops of a cord nailed to the wall. The kitchen was her pride and paradise ; in it she forgot a little of her sorrow.

Evening swelled out its shadowy balloon ; her brother would be home from the office shortly, and her mother from the temple. The lady of the adjacent house stood on the threshold, talking with the milkman ; in the verandah a group of girls were noisily engaged in a game of knucklebones ; the road in front was the continual twang of a bowstring, pleasure cars rushing to the seaside ; and on Syamala's ears the noises fell like music by an unpractised hand on a harmonium. Rude music, for she was ever concerned with her solo on the strings of pain.

“ Syamala ! ”

It was her mother calling from outside.

She could hear her talking softly, caressively in baby language ; and between brief intervals of silence uttering those ardent, abrupt exclamations so dear to the devotee in apostrophizing the endless attributes of god.

She opened the door.

"Syamala," the mother asked, "hasn't your brother come home yet?"

The question was unnecessary and she knew it. But the mother-heart always asks for the son and goes on asking though he be present or absent.

"No, mother."

In the meantime the boy of three who was chumbling a bit of cocoanut kernel had slid off the old woman's hip and run towards Syamala.

The grandmother looked at him with eyes half-reproachful, half-delighted, and said :—

"I am my darling's horse whenever he wants to ride. Isn't that so?"

The boy smiled a little abashed, shrouding his face in his mother's bosom. Suddenly he darted back, gave a kiss on his granny's cheek, quite a birdlike peck, and was again by the side of his mother.

"Come, come," he chirped, and dragged Syamala to her room.

"Where are my dolls?" he presently asked; and she gave him the dolls to play.

The toy motorcar sprawled on its side with two of its wheels knocked out; the squeaking mouse did not squeak because he had bitten off the button; the rubber ball lay like a cup.

"Play," his mother said.

And he played.

She sat watching him, a tenderness like bloom stealing into an apple stealing into her face. But it was the tenderness of melancholy. She caught his profile and started for her mind was slowly receding, and in receding she was becoming still as a picture, yet intangible as a dream . . . .

"Syamala! Syamala!" came a voice, clear and soft as a sigh, and her husband stood by her side, gazing ardently at her.

Three years slipped from her and she was seventeen again. It was the middle of night and they were in their bedchamber. She sobbed in pain and he tried to console.

"Why do you go on like this, moaning

and complaining, moaning and complaining all the twenty-four hours of the day? Can't you forget? A woman *can* forget," his voice huskily persisted.

"Forget! Oh, how could I? The cradle is empty but his cries haunt me still," she wailed.

"And talking always of this to the neighbouring women and crying your heart out—is this the only solace you have found?"

"You don't know what it is for a woman to lose her first-born. Only another woman can understand and sympathize."

"Strange! That's why you don't admit me into your sorrow. But it is as much my child as your own."

"True, but you have forgotten it all. Man easily forgets. He has a thousand things to attract him. *You* go about cheerfully."

"Don't throw on me such unkind words, my dear. You have made a daily grief of it but I have not. Sorrow is not only useless but ungrateful. Youth should not be wasted in unreasonable sorrow. We are still young and our moments of desire are many. And desire is wonderful, is more precious than

gems and gold. I can thrill you and awake you to enormous joys. We will have children, and one very soon ; for I have heard the wise women say, the child in the pit lies really in the lap of its mother," he whispered, and drew her to him, and she the tear-nipped rose shut suddenly and was a bud again in his arms. Her petulance was gone, the aching cords untautened ; little wings of velvet flapped about her limbs, flapping her to a dulcet swoon ; and when in the warmth of his caresses she unclosed herself petal by petal down to her dewy core, she clung to him, moaning in her bliss, moaning like a dove : " Never more will I be cross with you. Forget what I said in the bitterness of my grief, and oh, be kind to me as you have always been. Promise ! Promise ! " But he was silent, his whole being was centred to the brilliance of a throbbing star ; hers too, and in that moment of starry equipoise when flesh was nought and life an epithalame of twin spirits, she knew that what he had wished for had come upon her. It was unmistakable, the supreme benediction ; she had cried the little cry of awe and wonder that was the experience and fulfilment, and that she had

known. But his silence did not break, it was profounder than ever, and he had drawn away from her, sure of his potency, swiftly like a snake and as softly . . . .

Syamala shook herself up, the nostalgia of those voices and images was too much to bear ; her boy was tugging at her sari. There was a rattle and at her feet was tumbled a number of bright seashells.

"Look, mother, look !" cried the boy, striking a couple of shells that made a clucking sound when struck.

Syamala stood in silence, her eyes unseeing and hot with unshed tears. While for a brief space she had become clairvoyant and dreamed in the warmth that was memory, the only warmth for the rest of her life, her boy had taken the box of seashells from the windowsill, not content with the broken playthings he was given. She looked on unseeing but conscious of what she was looking at, and a sob came gurgling out of her throat. It was like the unplumbed sob of the sea. For into the sea her husband had gone while bathing on a day when there was an eclipse of the moon. The priest



had said that the Serpent had hitched its tail to his (her husband's) star and for redemption he should bathe in the sea with the charm of the palmyra leaf tied over his brow. And he had gone to bathe and to become a spirit in the glaucous bosom of the sea ; naked he did not come into the world again. The shells were collected by him of an evening in the beach when he and she had sported in the gayest of gay moods. Pink shells, brown shells, ivory shells, wreathed and frilled by wind and wave, and scattered like jewels on the sand. The posthumous child played with them calling to its mother, calling in vain.

Syamala stood nowhere though she was standing in the room, her young shoulders bent under a hump of pain. The boy looked with fear and mistrust at her aloofness and grew itself aloof. Night had fallen dark, angel hands were strewing sequins all over the sky in jubilee. There was a knock at the door, then the shuffle of sandalled feet, and voices in conversation. Syamala heard her brother calling her, her mother repeating the call. And she was of the earth again.

## THE WAR MEMORIAL

### I

FOR a space of five minutes no sound was audible except the whirr of the Singer. The shop was in a quiet nook of the City, a little room in the front of a tenement house. The tailor was a young mohammedan, about twenty-three; tall and muscular, compact as the machine at which he worked. While he ran the diaphanous piece of veil under the needle, his sensitive fingers quivered like the antennae of an insect; a bodice beautiful as a dream stole into shape; the young tailor straightened himself on the stool, leaned back on the wall, regarded his work and sighed.

His friend, the Cat, miaowed. It jumped onto his shoulder, curled its tail, and nuzzled against his neck. The loving caress for which it sat expectant did not come, miaowing again it jumped down, looked back, pensive and paw-uplifted, and hurried away.

Nureddin awoke from his deep musing. "I can't go on any more like this," he said to himself, "making a measly eight annas a day. Nobody appreciates good work and a lady of quality nowadays knows as much about the art of embroidery as a kaffir knows about a houri. My work is wasted, my youth is wasted, and here I am, finding it hard, damned hard to give a meal a day to my aged parents. *Bismilla* ! I am not a coward, I shall go," he exclaimed, and paused for a while, as if listening to his own voice of decision within as to the call of the muezzin. He then wiped his forehead but could not wipe off the wrinkles that long and intent looking through the needle's eye had wrought thereon. Something stirred at his feet ; he felt the soft warmth of fur, looked down and smiled. It was his friend, the Cat.

There were two more hours for night-fall, but he put on his fez and closed the shop.

## II

"My son, you must not go and leave us alone in our old age," cried Resham-jan, and her voice trembled like a wet feather. "Mesopotamia ! Whoever has heard of that country ? It must be far, far away, and what kind of people it has, Allah alone knows. And you say men are killing each other there. Oh no, my son, if you go you kill us !" She caught him by his arms and stroked his cheek with her poor worn palm, straining into his eyes all her mother-soul the while.

Gulam Ali, the father, sat silent. Taking his long beard in his hands he rocked himself ; not long before he was a married man he had known and acknowledged the superior wisdom of his wife. Nureddin was their only son, their darling and their hope. An ancestor of Gulam Ali had served the puissant Nawabs of Arcot ; the stars and flowers and tendrils he had woven in the robes of lords and ladies gay remained

undimmed in the art of Gulam Ali—he was a master embroiderer ; he wailed that his brothers took more and more to wearing the Feringhee's clothes ; who cared for lungis and pyjamas of exquisite wove and brilliant embroidery ?

Now his son was determined on going to Mesopotamia as a tailor in the Army Clothing Department. “He dreams of making a huge pile, dear boy,” he thought, “but who will take care of us when he is gone ?” With his beard in his hands he rocked himself disconsolately.

“Mother, I'll be back soon,” said Nured-din ; “this is the chance of my life and I can't let it slip. Money that can't be earned here by hard and honest work in twenty years, can be earned there in two years. I'll be back soon, mother dear, and then every day, *pilao* and *kicheri* for us.”

“Meeah ! Meeah !” sobbed the poor mother, though she knew that all her streaming tears and all her aged despair were powerless to keep him ; “what you earn here is enough to feed us, and Allah will surely reward honest work. You are young and innocent and it is a wicked world.”

But Nureddin was nine stones of solid resolution. Embracing his parents and uttering the parting word he tore himself away from them. Resham-jan covered her mouth with her veil and sobbed; Gulam Ali's beard was wet with silent tears.

"*Khoda hafiz ! Khoda hafiz !*" they cried after him.

### III

Two years passed, three. Nureddin! Nureddin! The son had turned into a bodiless cry in the abode of the aged parents.

Death had been busy in far-off Mesopotamia which he had made his high capital; cholera raged; cholera, dark, ruthless, stalked with a thousand feet through its narrow and tortuous streets.

Gulam Ali and Resham-jan prayed for the return of their son.

In a strange country Nureddin was dead and burnt.

Ali's sight was failing. His fingers plied the needle in the wrong places; the stars and

flowers and tendrils sprawled as caricatures. "Oh, my son, will I see you before I am blind, before I am dead?" he murmured into the soft piece of silk over which he bent and strained.

In a strange country Nureddin was dead and burnt.

"Do I hear my darling's footfalls? Every night he came to me and put into my hands the silver and copper bits. They were gold. And I watched him eat his food heartily; he seemed Yusuff himself, the bright, the beautiful, to mine eyes. Tomorrow, yes, tomorrow, my Nureddin will come to me!" so talked the mother in her misery.

In a strange country Nureddin was dead and burnt.

#### IV

The twilight was a twilight of flowerdust. Before, lay the darkling sea studded with diamond points and eyed like peacock-plumes, fringed by yellow sands ruffled and ribbed by the wind; behind, the Cooum rolled out like a broad black ribbon; and farther beyond, the

greensward and the girdle of the  
middle, rose the stately War Memorial

Gulam Ali and Resham-jan knelt  
stood there. To commemorate the  
fallen in the field of honour ! Y  
great leveller ; the army cook and  
launderer, the army tailor and the ar  
the drummer, the trumpeter, the bu  
gallant soldier who bears his breast  
point of the bayonet and to the b  
bullet, are all suckled alike at the b  
lona. One may wrestle with De  
while another will be stunned to dea  
have a marble monument while anot  
a simple headstone ; but when Peac  
Cenotaph and the martial music pla  
of a brave memory, the crown of  
with imperial lustre on one and all

The aged pair crossed the  
stood before the column. Overhe  
had shapes and hues : like a quarry  
like crags of rubies, like yawning  
The pearls paled, the rubies brok  
twilight of flowerdust stayed charg  
black dust from the coal mines.



“My son!—oh, my son!” cried the woman, lifting her veil, and in a sudden access of grief. “You died in a strange country, among Feringhees and Kaffirs, and we could not build a tomb for you, light the light, and pray beside your tomb. But Allah has been kind; *He* has given you the tomb and *He* has lighted the lights. “*Ul-humd-ul-illa!*” she exclaimed, the tears flowing fast from her eyes. Her rapt expression betokened the ecstasy of seeing a vision—the stately granite column shortening and animating into the form of her youthful son. “*Ul-humd-ul-illa!*” she cried again, molten all inside like the mid-Ramzan moon. Her husband echoed the praise; and the wind that frolicked as frivolous as a gipsy, stood suddenly still, heard and caught *Ul-humd-ul-illa*, and whistled it to land and sea, to sea and land, to land, sea, and starry sky.

## THE MOTORMAN

I WAS then a clerk in the statistical section of the Customs House, with the high hope of becoming one day the superintendent of the section. Being young and fresh from college I attended to my work with flaming zeal, but was soon to know that my superiors were a set of crusted philistines who congealed all war blood. Years passed, but no promotion; and hope with the years progressed asymptotically.

It was a Sunday afternoon in June—I attended to 'urgent papers' on holidays—and escaping from the musty files and the musty air of the office, mooned about the harbour for

an hour or so, looking at the coolies and the cranes at work. The sea breeze blew with a hushing tenderness; the lapping of waves and the chuff-chuffing of motorboats as they cut the waves came in as melodious sea sounds. The sky echoed the blue of the sea; and between the two limitless blues of sea and sky not a shadow swung, not a cloud stained the glowing ether; only on the edge of the horizon rose a plume of smoke, pale amber in the womb of the azure. It was the steamer from Rangoon hastening to port. But the steamer was bringing me nobody, and much as I liked the soporific influences around to gain on me, the thought of the wife at home waiting patiently for my return, and from whom the office had stolen the hours of a holiday legitimately hers, made me walk out of the harbour.

The Barbersbridge tram was ready on the track to start. It was empty, and the conductor who was a familiar fellow yawned. I jumped in; he blew his whistle, and the car began rattling. The conductor knew me for a season-pass holder, rising as the sun and setting as the sun in that tram orbit, and he advanced towards

me smiling. I was in the mood for a chat and to his query, "Have to go to office even on Sundays?" I nodded Yes. Interestedly, he regarded my fingers smudged with ink and asked: "Writing and writing heaps?"

"We have to write," I answered simply, proud with the dignity of the plural usage.

"And we have to whistle and whistle away our life," he rejoined. The conductor knew the pretty nuances of talk.

The car was gathering speed with moans and creaks and more moans and oscillating up to Parryscorner when a cry to stop was heard. The conductor whistled, but the motorman was in the moonland; he whistled shrilly, the dreamer in khaki turned round with a wry face, drew a curve with his foot, stooped, grinded the quern that was the brake, and the car lurched to a stop at the bend. And it had to for upward three minutes; in three strides the conductor had reached the tail-end and was waiting to receive the passenger.

"O Yella, don't curse me. It's not my fault." So I heard him cry with deep concern. And immediately I saw a man of thirty-five or

thereabouts buoying up on the footboard, and taptapping slowly in to sit. His right leg below the knee was wooden and its iron-ringed end was painfully visible. He sat wiping the sweat off his brow and complimented the motorman by calling him a dhoby's ass. The ass did no bray, it grinned foolishly; perhaps it was stone-deaf.

The tram resumed rattling. The conductor and Mr Woodenleg chatted, nodding heads, winking eyes, and smile chasing smile in their faces. Thick as thieves, I thought. Another stage was reached with a couple of passengers boarding in, and at the next cars-stop-here-if-required, I saw Yellan tapping out and the conductor looking after him wistfully, his forehead wrinkling, so it seemed to me, into many memories.

I was interested, Mr Woodenleg had not paid the fare. And he was too down-and-out, shabby, unkempt, so like a tramp, to possess a seasonpass and his friend had not demanded the fare of him. I thought of calling the conductor to my side when he himself approached me.

"A wonderful fellow!" he said, without

any attempt at a preamble ; " he was one of us, the Company's servants, one of the smartest motormen that kept his uniform clean and his brass buttons shining like moons. But he lost his leg—this he accompanied with a click click of his tongue—and lost his job."

" In an accident, in a collision ? " I asked.

" Yes and No. He alone was responsible for it."

" How do you mean ? "

" It all happened ten years ago (he continued), but I remember everything clearly, as if it happened only yesterday. Yellan had more blood in him than was good for a young man, and god drained the superfluous part in due time. He was given too much that way." Here he lowered his tone, watching its effect on me.

" Was he not a married man then ? You people marry early."

" He was a married man and Gangi was a trusting and devoted girl. That's the bitterest part of the story. But Vallachi knew how to noose a young fellow. She was a fruitseller and sat on the kerb near the Tana with her basketful

of fruits, particular to the season, for sale. Twenty, fleshy, of the colour of coffee, full-bosomed and dusky-eyed, she was a perfect she-animal that raises the animal spirits in man. I don't know when the pair had met for the first time and where ; but here was Yellan stopping the car near the kerb though it was not a stopping stage, sprinting to Vallachi, his face wreathed with smiles, and she welcoming him, her face wreathed with smiles ; and he snatching away a couple of oranges out of her basket, sprinting back, and driving the car ! And every day regularly ! Obviously, they had known one another for a long time. Somehow Inspector Shamsuddin, we call him the Tiger, came to know of this sport or scandal or whatever you may like to call it ; warned Yellan three or four times ; and finally even threatened him that he would see him fired, if he persisted in his mad folly. Whether he was off duty or on duty Yellan's young blood was coursing, drumming, and simmering ; his flesh twisting and creeping to Vallachi's. Straightway the Inspector's back was turned on him, he would thrust out his tongue and emit through his nose a noise as if

proceeding from an application of the air brake. He had turned out such a devil-may-care fellow.

"But things began to go wrong. Yellan, a good friend to all of us, was growing fretful. Often he drove the car at top-speed, indifferent to the speedzones, saying he was driving the Punjab Mail or the Tufan Express. But he had such a perfect control over the brakes that we were sure he would not run into an accident. The accident, however, did happen.

"It was about eleven o' clock morning, one Monday. Yellan ran No. 52, the Washer-manpet—Barbersbridge car. I was on duty as conductor. Early that morning I had noted his gloomy expression, but in his talk I could not detect any trace of excitement. No. 52 with an almost full load of passengers was on its fourth down trip. Yellan was doing ten miles uniformly; the car neared the point at the kerb where Vallachi sold fruits, when all on a sudden I saw Yellan abandoning the handle and flying out a regular swallow flight. And in the wink of an eye I had raced to the handle, applied the brake, and prevented the car from leaping the rails, the passengers huddling like frightened



sheep and a woman screaming. Almost simultaneously I heard an automobile bumping to a stop with a screech and a smell of burnt tyres, and what I saw the next moment horrified me. A battered and bleeding leg was protruding from beneath it !

“Poor Yellan came to himself amid shudders and groans, reeling, racked, and wrestling with pain ; amid a thousand ghostly noises, the clanking of a myriad bells, the sighing of many winds, and the rush of multitudinous waters in the Elphinstone Ward of the General Hospital. These were his very feelings as he described them to me, sir. Yellan lost his name, like the tram he drove he was No. 14. The next day morning, mysterious chloroform, dark, delicious, drew his being into its numbing depths, and his right leg was amputated at the knee. He stayed in the hospital for five months for the wound to heal ; I visited him weekly, his poor wife too ; but the rascal was hoping and hoping that Vallachi would come to see him, would come with oranges. Once or twice he slyly hinted about that to me but I silenced him curtly. As yet I was ignorant of the cause of his mad jump

from the tram ; he was unwilling to tell but when at last he could no more stand my importunity, said : 'She was turning sort of cold towards me and that morning I saw her sari trailing negligently down her shoulder, exposing her naked arm and a naked breast, and she was laughing and chatting with a young guttersnipe. I knew what she was about, and the rotten whore—she was peeling an orange for him. I've given her half of my earnings and the sight was too much for my nerves, carrying on like that before my very eyes.'

"I offered no comment. It was positively useless to offer. And with haggard eyes, sunken cheeks, and a goatee, Yellan emerged out of the hospital limping on an wooden leg. He saw the freedom, the colour, and the rush of life outside ; saw the cars which he once drove stalking majestically away, with a sidelong glance of pity and contempt at him, pity for his lopped limb and contempt for his incontinence. He couldn't conceal the tears springing to his eyes, poor Yellan. I accompanied him to his home on his discharge. His wife was all tenderness towards him and worked in three houses as

maid, sweeping floors and scouring pots to maintain him. Yellan put on strength but Vallachi was always in his thoughts. He visited her twice; Vallachi laughed heartlessly at the wreck of him and threw orange peels at him. His wife came to know of these amorous excursions, and shrewd woman that she was, when she knew he was preparing for another visit, she made use of his wooden leg as fuel for the oven to keep him at home. Thrice she did like this: Yellan hopped and raged and raved in impotence. In the third burning, however, he saw a gleam of light; it seemed to illumine his virtuous and long-suffering wife with a radiance he understood, yet not understood fully. He cast Vallachi out of him as he would a devil. Yellan is now a devoted husband and a fond father."

"He *must* be," I affirmed, as if affirming my own inner life, the soul's immortal beauty that suffering fails to break, and the tram had jerked to a stop at the Ice House terminus.

## THE KOLU

SWISH !

The rope curved through the air and lashed the floor, her arms flapping like the wings of a bird as she skipped, and her little brother and sister sat watching, full of interest. A girl but a gazelle. Her dark eyes darkened more by kohl smiled merrily ; her ear-pendants shook and shed drops of emerald light into the hollows of her delicate clavicles as she skipped.

"How much ?" she asked, with a sudden pause and slackening her grip on the wooden handles of the skipping-rope.

"Hundred," said her sister.

"No, no, you've been counting wrong," corrected Kamala, "it's only eighty."

"I *have* counted right," rejoined the fluty voice, and if a girl of seven could be sure of her arithmetic it was in that voice of assertion.

"Well, well, we needn't quarrel over it," said Kamala, with a tolerance that three years' seniority could show; "I told you that you may have the rope after a hundred; if you want it early, why not ask and why count wrongly to cheat?"

The younger girl's face flushed as if it had been hit; she rubbed her eyes, her little bosom palpitating, and then she began to whimper. Knowing the sympathetic vibration it would cause in her four-year old brother and bring the mother on the scene, Kamala cried cajolingly: "Hush, my dear, I didn't mean it," and putting the skipping-rope into her hands turned to go.

"Stay," the sister called, "I counted for you and you must count for me. You are angry and that's why you want to go."

"I am not angry."

"You are."

"I am not."

“You are.”

And just when the skirmish showed signs of becoming tearful, there was a movement in one of the flaps of the front door and a face appeared. Timidly it drew back.

“It’s Sarasu!” exclaimed Kamala, “I had asked her to come and see the *Kolu*.” And she ran towards the door, a very wind of welcome, while the younger sister touched with a little of the same exuberance ran after her.

Sarasu was a dark girl, about eight or nine, shy as musk, with eyes that had the shine and sincerity of diamonds. What did it matter Sarasu was dark? Just as the sun looks upon a person too strongly and intently and throws upon him his shadowed livery, so the fire of the kitchen oven had looked upon Sarasu too intently, but she was comely, small and comely—of a type that could best be felt than described. It suggested such exquisite possibilities: of a sparkling spring shut up, an ebullient fountain sealed and sequestered; of a humming bee gone swooning over its own golden honeycomb; of a bunch of grapes in a secret coign of a vineyard maturing under the glimpses of the sun; of a

blithesome young doe standing awestruck at the haunting arrow of some invisible huntsman, instead of frisking along the mountain valleys and feeding among the spices and succulent lilies. So what did it matter Sarasu was dark? When the pigment held such riches within it?

Sarasu lived in the same street, four doors away, and was a friend of Kamala's. She moved so softly like a shade, that one wondered whether she would not at any moment be the shadow of it. Her voice was strangely sighing, its silvery ease seemed to be under an eternal muffle.

"I can only have a hasty look at the dolls," she said, "I must be back home before *she* misses me."

"How excited you are! Nothing will happen. Don't be afraid," comforted Kamala, and locking her hand in Sarasu's led her to a room in the left wing of the house.

The *Kolu* was indeed a beautiful sight. The dolls stood on an wooden structure, rising tier on tier, under an arch built of light bamboo and papered prettily all over. There were dolls of celluloid and porcelain in divers shapes and

hues : of brass and bronze polished to the brilliance of gold and silver, of bead marble and cool sandalwood ; my dog with crimson collars and mouths in arterial pink ; tabby cats ready to spring on the unexpecting mice below ; rabbits with ears pricked up and ever-startled eyes ; horses some picketed and some in full gallop ; elephants with trunks upraised as if pouring dust upon their heads ; h. r. h. the bengal tiger, conventionally furious ; his magnificence, the lion ; his vanity, the peacock, with feathers ruffled and crushing a king cobra under his legs ; a couple of parrots preening their plumes with ruddy beaks ; in fine, there were all things human, winged, and fanged in that little world raised as it were by a rub on an Aladdin's magic lamp. So colourful was it and so intense, it had a touch of heaven as well as of earth, and to the girls its newness never faded, its mystery was greater than that of Creation itself.

"Look !" said Kamala, pointing to a father doll, "what a big belly it has !"

They giggled.

"And there on the topmost row, the bridegroom and the bride wearing their best



clothes and holding each other's hands are lovely. Aren't they, Sarasu ? ”

Sarasu smiled faintly.

“ How the bride hangs down her head in shyness ! It will pain her neck, poor thing, thus looking at her toes always. Will you look at your toes,” Kamala asked turning to her sister, “ when your husband garlands you at your wedding ? ”

This sally accompanied by a nudge which she gave her sister tickled even the shy Sarasu ; they tittered looking at the celluloid bride whose sari which was a remnant from a tailor's cuttings seemed to go threadbare at their titter, and her necklace of glass beads to lose their iridescent play.

“ What are you girls laughing at ? ”

The mother who had been busy in the kitchen for the past one hour or so entered the room. A buxom woman, she seemed to have attained her rare mellowness through an undisturbed, orderly domestic life. She was not aware of the presence of Sarasu, and seeing her the smile of inquiry broadened on her face and she asked the girl :—

"Kamala has been asking you every day to come and see the *Kolu*. This is the eighth day and we thought you would never come."

"Not that I didn't want to come earlier," replied the girl; "she does not allow me to stir out of the house for a minute. I've come stealthily, I must be going now."

"Wait a minute more and do sing a song, everybody that comes to see the *Kolu* must sing. You know that, my dear."

Meenakshi then went into the kitchen and returned almost immediately bearing a vessel in her hands. It was covered.

It was evening now and the lamps that hung on either side of the bamboo arch were lit. The flames twinkled a moment, then began to steadily burn like gems, and in the illuminated bower, the dolls stared more eager-eyed than ever. Bottles cut out of coloured paper and imagined to contain attar of roses were unstoppered by the light; the desiccated leaves and flowers grew lush, almost to a Chinese profusion, and rustled with the rumours of Spring; the yellow paint of the wooden plantains bending in a bunch seemed to peel off to reveal the ivory white

inside. And a mirror on the newly limewashed wall opposite caught and kept within its gilded frames a replica of this eloquent swindle. Only the arcanum of a fairy tale though sensed remained too deeply hidden ; else the little birds and beasts would have sung and talked in human voices, and from every tiny flower would have stepped the tiniest of fairies to clasp hands and dance a ballet, to the tune of the myriad fingers of the wind playing on a myriad dulcet strings, under the peeping eyes of the stars and the minguant moon. Sarasu was lost in the loveliness of it all while she sang mechanically the latest song she had learnt.

"That was done beautifully!" complimented Meenakshi, as the song ended. "Now sit down all of you for here's something to eat."

The girls sat down, Sarasu unwillingly, and into their cupped hands the mother ladled out of the vessel boiled white peas sweetened with jaggery. Sarasu hesitated to eat ; Kamala encouraged her, her own mouth stuffed generously, and just when the girl was about to eat a mouthful she heard her name sharply called.

"It's *she*," she said in a scared tone, rising

hastily, and before Meenakshi could prevent her, she had reached the verandah.

"What a pity!" murmured Meenakshi.

The tears welled into the eyes of the two sisters while their little brother scattered his handful of peas in manly protest.

"What a pity!" murmured Meenakshi again.

A young woman whose eyes detonated anger confronted the girl outside and hissing a "Come along" walked up the street. The girl followed her like as one neglected and infinitely ill-used.

"So this is how you were minding baby?" she asked the girl as soon as they were inside their house.

Sarasu, instead of giving a reply, stood lowering her eyes to the floor. And cast heavily were the eyelids over the eyes holding back the torrents rising to her throat, which seeing would have undammed, and that another and not the woman in front of her; the same large round eyes, the same small uptilted nose, sensitive lips, and tender receding chin—everything the same without the slightest mutation; seeing her and

feeling the warmth of her endearing arms as of old clasping her to her bosom would have undamned those torrents, but a dark curtain had been rung down forever between them two, and she stood still, her eyes on the floor, drooped her pretty mouth, withdrawn in her misery.

"You won't come to good," the woman snapped, taking the howling little hun from the cradle; "you won't come to good, I assure you;" and her sudden silence during which she stared at the girl was more ferocious than her words.

Sarasu continued to gaze on the floor. This was her first *Kolu* year without a mother; and her father had felt the urgent need of a wife. Her *Kolu* dolls lay huddled in a basket somewhere in the attic; but a few stolen minutes before the dolls' house at her friend's had brought to her a splendid vision of the past—rosy with all the roses of the world, angelical with laughter, ambrosial with love, and in that vision the dead had come back for a moment and held a hushed colloquy with the living.

## TU QUOQUE!

HE saw her standing on the threshold of the house door opening on the street, a very pretty child about four years old, just a tiny bloom windblown from a bloomy spray. She had eyes wide as wonder and dark, dark abundant hair, too abundant for her age, plaited from the middle of the brow and joined to the braid curling petal-like at the nape. Child's innocence was her shining apparel; but her virgin shame was covered by a piece of beaten gold, fashioned like a little peepul leaf and swinging from a twisted alpaca thread tied about her waist. A necklace with a sovereign pendent was

the only other ornament on her person, and she stood on the threshold, opening and closing the door vigorously and delighted with the squealing of the hinges.

It was mid-morning and the street being far from the main road had few pedestrians. He watched the child from the thither side, from a curve where the street twitched abruptly into a blind alley, watched with intent, purposeful eyes. He seemed to make certain mental calculations and his glance though furtive was bold. He then began slowly to walk up, mending his pace every couple of yards, but stopped short, seeing a woman coming opposite him, loudly vending greens. She passed him by and out of sight, and at the next impediment which came immediately after, he swore vulgarly under his breath. It was a pedlar raucously crying, colouring the morning air with a crowd of manycoloured balloons, some like pumpkins and some like gourds, clustered round the top of a pole which he held high in one hand and with the other swung a bell to keep to the rhythm of his cry. He stopped near the child, ringing the bell sharply ; a young woman, obviously her

mother, came out and paid for a couple of balloons, and giving them to the child took her by the arm to go in. The watcher saw this with his heart in his mouth, but was relieved to find the next instant the child stamping her foot to be left alone. The mother vanished inside, and the child played, whisking the balloons by the twines tied to their nipples. The pedlar passed, the sound of his bell still came from an adjacent street, sweetly mellowed; and when with a sense of achievement he turned round to move, he only turned to see an old beggar with a gibbous belly tottering up with a stick. He swore more vulgarly in his infinite impatience and spat outright; the child might go into the house any moment. He wished to break the stick and kick the belly; every slow step of the decrepit fell like a thud of doom upon his palpitating heart; the blood cuddled to his bones and his fingers itched with frenzy. He felt like strangling the stupid old thing that tottered on three legs. Tap tap tap, the stick tapped by and the hemespherical belly dwindled into a convex back. He made a dart; there was a quick explosion of the balloons bursting, then



the shrill scream of a child. Tucking the necklace deftly about his waist and looking neither to the right nor left he cut along. He neared a bend that would shut him off from the scene of his crime and just when rounding it, heard the first cry, "Thief!" "Thief!" echoed a dozen voices instantly and feet came running after him. "Thief! Thief! Catch him! Bind him!" cried voices staccato and sonorous; he shot into alleys, scuttled through lanes, ducked, dived, dodged, kept gluing along walls where walls were, and from the growing noises knew that his pursuers were increasing.

The thoroughfare was in sight; a minute more and he would be lost in its swirling traffic. But he felt a hand clutching his shoulder, breath like that of a hound of hell curling about his neck, heard the shout of triumph; wriggling, his thews on fire, he loped into a side-street and kicking open a small door on the wall precipitated himself in. The door had no latch and that on the farther side of the narrow privy was tightly shut. He was hemmed in and the pursuer hot on his heels entered after and grasped him by the throat. And binding his

hands behind his back with the cloth thrown across his shoulders, he dragged him out into the midst of the crowd which was panting, perspiring, and with fists clenched for a hearty pummeling . . . .

The passenger in the third class compartment who dozed while its other occupants numbering seven—four men, two women, and a child—were fast asleep, awoke with a start, for he seemed to have felt the hearty pummeling. In his imagination Essakki re-enacted the exciting scenes of two years ago : his snatching the necklace from the person of the child, the child's scream of pain and fear, the chase, the angry crowd, the stern face of the complainant, the police court, and the magistrate sitting darkly on the dais. At twenty-five, though a worthy candidate for a Fagin's Academy, he had not made theft as his major trade ; a dislike to work in mills and factories or for menial service and a certain romanticism in his blood which regarded life as an adventure and a sport had turned him into an honest sort of hooligan and he thieved only to satisfy the cruel necessity of existence. But for once, sport had turned into battle, and

embattled he had served his two years' rigorous in the Vellore Jail. And having done his time he was returning home.

Essakki sat with knees up and head thrown against the wooden panelling in a corner seat facing the engine, his body rocking to the motion of the train and his ears taking in drowsily the endless lullaby of rolling wheels and coupling chains. Occasionally a cloud of coal-smoke shot with crimson sparks went swinging against the clear cerulean of the sky; he stirred in his seat when through the open window the blackening smuts came hitting on his face. His mind was alert though his eyes were closed; he thought of the prison life, of the days he had swept the yard, washed the cells, ground *ragi* for the prison food. They had worked him hard and his spirit was dead. Now life was again beginning for him, life most fresh, growing suddenly out of the twilight death of two years. The change was miraculous, the muddy vesture glowed like a mantle of fire and gold. He will thief nevermore; his last act of crime against an innocent child created in his subconscious the picture of a host of children clamouring his

wicked deed in his ears and every cry dredging a star out of the heavens !

Zug zug zug tr-ra-rah tra-ra-rah . . . over runnels and broad canals, through leafy lanes and wide rice-fields, past heaths and marshes, the train rushed pounding its iron song, and Essakki sat, his syes shut, his head oscillating against the wooden panelling, vaguely aware of the dimlit little stations where the train hauled down for a few minutes' stop, of porters running to and fro in the platform, of the dark turbaned vendors balancing trays of fruits and biscuits and *pan* and cakes and fly-ridden sweets on their heads or in their hands, and calling their wares in a hurried husky voice. Suddenly, an exultation he had never before experienced filled his mind, and he found himself humming a tune that had lifted a stageactress to stardom and had been on the lips of everyone in the town for a most musical time. Rising up, he leaned against the open window and gazed at the far-receding distances. The Mother of Months was in her full matronly splendour ; the night lay like a great cool-cyst swollen with celestial light, shadow-soft and listening to its own mysterious song of

silence. He drew down his head and looked in, the contrast was terrible.

In the tawny electric light mottled with dead moths and a swarm of moths flitting about the men and women looked older and dirtier; one or two lying asprawl and snoring were even vulgar. The constable who escorted him was in mufti; he had made a bundle of his cap, puttees, and khaki uniform, and placed it near his reposing head. At his feet below the bench stood his boots, black and heavy, with tongues lolling out like those of tired dogs. The leather was parched and cracked at the toes and wrinkled at the heels; the eyelets which were worn out by constant lacing and unlacing looked like the eyes of dead fish; and they stood there naked and unashamed, the constable had not taken the trouble to polish them for over weeks; perhaps he was expecting a new pair, Essakki thought, and thrust out his nether lip in disgust. There was a rich, satisfying smell of mangoes in the compartment; a basket up above the rack breathed the season of measles and mellow fruitfulness. At Katpadi Essakki had seen a couple of trucks being loaded with

the fruits. Inhaling the smell his mouth watered and he thirsted to dig deep his teeth in the luscious flesh of a mango.

A baby wailed. Essakki sank back in his seat. The older of the two sleeping women sat up and awoke the younger. "Have him for a while, he is hungry," she said, giving the child to her. The baby blinked at the light and troubled by its glare set up a louder wail. The mother dandled it in her arms, then placing it in her lap and looking stealthily round plunged a hand into her bosom. There was a sharp smack of suckling, then an infant grunt of pleasure.

Through slits of seeming slumber Essakki watched the mother and child. His look grew interested. It was wonderful to be a baby, he thought, and be suckling like that. Such glorious rondures, big-seeming and generous with ambrosial milk. She must have been just out of her confinement, she looked so maternal. And the forlorn, abstracted look on her handsome young face suffused with sleep! He tried to remember his own mother, when abruptly his reflection was cut short at the sight of something falling from

the waist of the woman when she inserted a thumb and loosened her sari for comfort. He saw that it was a currency note of good denomination and with this knowledge, his mind which was luminous till a moment ago grew suddenly dim and gloomed like an attic, and thoughts there like rats and mice began to gnaw loudly, scamper wildly. And without his being aware of it, a shadow of a smile crossed his face, like sunshine over a patch of water; he dreamed of the freedom that was his from the morrow, of the plump dusky girl who sold vegetables in the *kotwal* market. Her caresses came warmly to his memory and her laughter floated sweetly to his ears; the wind for him was suddenly filled with the scent of jasmine—Vatamalli was her name; ah luck, that he could have a ripping time with her after such a long separation!

Reluctantly he threw a quick blanket over the vision of his sweetheart and rose to his feet. The currency note still lay on the floor, the lady had not noticed its fall. And with a movement between a hop and a sprint he brushed past her, and leaning out of the window blew his nose.

He walked back allowing his right foot to make a curve of exploration, coughed, clapping a palm to the pit of his stomach, and stumbling over the boots stooped and set them in position.

The constable in mufti stirred in his sleep, breathing heavily. And for the fraction of a minute his sleeping eyes were wide awake, much too wide awake for their tiredness.

Essakki regained his seat.

Just then the train slacked ; the permanent way was under repair and on either side of the track sleepers and fishplates lay tarrily aglow on moonlit mounds of sand.

It was six o' clock and broad daylight when the train pulled up at the Basinbridge Junction for the scheduled halt of fifteen minutes. The passengers in the compartment tidied themselves and put their luggage in order, and their talk was muted with the sleep and silence of overnight. A thin anglo-indian in white boarded the carriage and collected the tickets. The constable in a corner struggled into his uniform and this came as a surprise upon Essaki. He looked askance at him and then at the young lady, and scratched his head meditatively.



"Need you put on your uniform?" he presently asked his escort.

"What were you taking me for? Your pot-companion, eh?"

Not the kind of answer that Essakki expected which made him mute as a fish. In trousers and coat buttoned up to the neck, the policeman sat unrolling his puttees, and as he began to wind one about a hairy leg Essakki was visibly excited. He moistened his lips and essayed to speak again.

"May I polish your boots for you?" he said tremulously, holding out his cloth; "they are dusty."

The policeman lifted his head and almost barked :—

"Why are you so officious? And why does your voice quaver so? You are a free fellow now."

And he smiled roguishly, stroking his moustache and patting the red sleeve-badgè. He then took his boots and giving each a dash with his coated elbow inserted deliberate feet into them and laced them tightly. He looked up, hearing his interlocutor hem rather loudly.

“What are you grinning at? I am a better polisher and have polished my boots for well-nigh twenty years. And besides a policeman’s boots need stronger fingers than yours.”

Essakki turned aside to hide the leer that had unconsciously shaped on his face; the policeman had refused the service he had so humbly offered, and he knew that policemen never refused the services of others, especially when it came to palm claspings in friendship and geniality.

The train snorted out and all its smoke and steam had crept into Essakki’s head in a whirl, and his heart had begun to beat wildly to the stroke of its piston before it yielded up its breath at the Central Station. In the bustle of porters and in the clutter of trolleys he let himself lose awhile; but when through the exit he saw his fellow-travellers, the women, disappear, he felt that a very valuable link that had connected him with them had snapped.

At eight o’ clock, accompanied by the constable, the ex-convict reported himself before the Commissioner of Police. His name went into the black register in fadeless ink.

Walking out of the Police Office, Essakki asked the constable :—

“ You think you are cleverer than me ? ”

“ What the hell—? ”

“ Your boots ! ” and he winked maliciously.

“ Boots, boots, boots ! Confound the boots ! Haven't you seen boots in your life, you idiot ? You've been harping on them most disgustingly.” He cocked his police cap and wiped an imaginary bead of sweat off his brow.

“ Now, now, why should we quarrel so ? Why can't we be friends ? ” And he extended his hand in well-meaning fellowship.

“ Friends, bah ! You must thank your stars that I have not packed you to jail again. Your friends are on the slime of the gutter. And they are the warmer for it. And you—walk into their welcoming arms.” With which he swung on his heels with tenfold police swagger.

Essakki was too choked with rage to answer; he saw the boots, puttees, khaki uniform, and the red peaked cap vanish swiftly into a coffee hotel. He had tried to be safe from a possible suspicion and search, but he had never for a

moment thought that his caution would so woefully vanquish his cunning.

Seated at a table inside the hotel and drinking in the odour of fresh-made sweets and savouries the constable unloosened the lace of one of his boots. He bent low and fished out of it a piece of crumpled paper which he smoothed on his thigh, a smile spreading over his face and a sigh of supreme contentment filling out his shrunk shanks.

Bliss was it to be a policeman and to be smiling like that, but to get an occasional ten-rupee currency note was very heaven !

## NAKED SHINGLES

### I

FAR, far away, where the sea and sky mated under a luminous haze, roses were beginning to bloom. The sea lay as smooth as glass, the wind was still. At this early hour of dawn the Triplicane Beach presented a scene of quiet liveliness; dragging the logs of wood to the shingle shore and lashing them together fishermen were busy launching their catamarans.

The sun half-peeped over the rim of the sea and the waters grayed. One catamaran alone lay amid the pebbles unlaunched as yet. Beside it stood a fisherman, now looking at the sea and now with an impatient toss of his head to where

the sands ended and the Marina pavement ran. Presently, two forms were discernible on the sandy level, moving forward in evident haste. One was a lad of about nineteen, tall and lithe, the other a boy of six who kept a continuous dog-trot by his elder's side.

They reached the shore.

"Mari," now cried the fisherman standing by the catamaran, "you are late again. What made you so?"

In answer Mari only scratched his head and smiled.

"See!" the former continued, pointing to the waters, "they are all gone, and we are left behind as usual."

"As usual!" echoed Mari, becoming vocal at last; "and as usual, Kali, we will be blessed with the heaviest haul."

In a trice Kali's asperity was gone; smiling genially on his younger brother and affecting seriousness he cried: "You lazy, lazy loon."

No more was said between the two; with a word to the boy to go home and not roll like a mad puppy on the sands, they were soon on the bosom of the deep, their catamaran leaping

and dancing waywardly till slowly it got under way. But with perverse delight the boy started to chase a crab that, popping out of a hole was moving quickly, obliquely ; dropped on his knees when it eluded him and scooped frantically away at the spot where it had disappeared—a wave wimpling in, combing the sand smooth and wiping away all trace of the flight and pursuit ; the wave receding, more crabs darting out in roseate flakes or blinking at the edges of their holes, chasing them again and tiring himself, the boy hooted his contempt for these silly creatures, and stood watching the catamaran diminish into a speck, as he had watched every morning with a new and growing interest in that strange land beyond the sea where he too would go when he was big like his father and his uncle ; then turning back set off at a quick run.

## II

Before a hut, a little apart from the huddle of tumble-down fishermen's huts on the left bank of the Buckingham Canal, the boy stopped. Everything around it was trim and tidy ; a torn

sail tanned by the sun and the sea-wind lay in a part of the front yard, and near it an old net, all in a pile, through whose sides here and there the white threads showed furtively, obviously in the process of mending. On the sail a black dog had made himself a warm bed. As soon as he saw the boy he got up wagging his tail, and the little master pleased with the welcoming sign got on his back for a ride, and as a preliminary, administered with his fist a blow on his head which brought from the animal a sharp yelp. Hearing the dog's cry a woman came out of the hut, and at the sight before her, burst out laughing.

"You will kill the poor thing, you naughty, naughty child," cried she, "and then with whom will you play?"

"I won't kill him," said the boy, shaking his head.

"Then get down from his back like a deer and run in to eat your food. Fishes fried and—"

The fond mother had to break off in the pleasure of seeing her son roll like a lump of flesh into the hut.

Andayi, Kali's wife, was at the time the



incidents of this story took place, twenty-two years old. Of medium height, with a face oval in shape and rendered striking by the expression of the eyes, clear, honest, unlowering ; so unlowering as to be eloquent of their contemptuous indifference to the many meaningful glances of men, she shone with the rich gifts of a halcyon sea : her body as wine-dark as its waters, her heart as buoyant as the wind that romped over its wide bosom. Her hair was always tied into a neat knot, firm and shapely as a shell at the nape ; perhaps because it had more meshes than a net's that it was tied thus. She was an exemplary housewife and shrewd business woman ; in the fish market she always sold well and to advantage, which prosperity was a matter for the envy of other garrulous fisherwomen. Verily was she called the Queen of the Fish Market ; even Karuppayi, her formidable rival, whose lore of ' fine ' words was credited to be the greatest in the whole *kuppan* was tongue-tied before her quiet and queenly bearing. Virtuous in wedlock, she united a virgin tenderness with devotion for her somewhat sentimental husband. She never allowed her darling son to mingle

with the little ragamuffins of the *kuppam*, nor her husband and her brother-in-law to move very freely with men who made regular pilgrimage to the pot-house at eventide. So some of the fisher-folk called her a virago, and the two brothers asses. But these spiteful remarks were made behind their backs only, and such people are no better than cowards.

### III

The white broiling noon slowly mellowed into evening and a gentle breeze murmured through the cocoanut glade in which the cottages lay. Andayi had by now collected fuel for the kitchen fire, done a little marketing, and got everything in readiness for the supper.

Taking a wicker basket and carrying her boy on her hip, she walked towards the beach. Reaching there she awaited her men's return.

One by one the fishermen rowed ashore after the day's hard toil. There at a distance, a crowding of brown sail was sighted, pompously bellying the wind; anon it was furled and the catamaran was lost to view, but presently again

it leaped forward like a dolphin through the foaming billows—thus mounting and dropping amid the undulations, one by one the catamarans glided into the strand.

And soon, 'holding acquaintance with the waves' Kali and Mari came. Andayi stood up, her face wide with a smile and eyes agleam with welcome. The men smiled in response. Yes, they had the great big luck that day. Three big fishes in addition to the usual smaller ones! The wicker basket teemed with the treasure of the tide and the devoted wife sent a silent thanksgiving to goddess *Mari Amman* for their opulence which seemed to grow day by day.

While the two brothers were unlashng the catamaran and depositing the detached logs on the dry sands, a crowd had collected around the basket, some desirous of purchasing the fishes, but most for a mere look at them.

"Two rupees for the whole lot," cried a neatly dressed middle-aged man who had come with his wife and children bent on pleasure to the seaside.

"And eight annas," cried another of the same class.

"Three," said the former triumphantly.

"Three-eight," coolly said the second.

"Four."

"Four-eight."

"Five."

And the middle-aged man won. Through this wrangle for buying Andayi was too jubilant to speak, she knew it would come to five rupees; such things had happened twice or thrice before. She received the white unsmudged currency note and held it awhile between her fingers, a lovely banneret waving her triumph; then pulling out a tiny bag (a receptacle for money as well as for betel and nut) from her waist, put it therein, and thrust the bag back into its original place, satisfied with the rich gain the quick sale of the fishes had brought. Then joining her men she retraced her way to the hut.

"The fishes are snatched away from her hands whilst we have to sell them in the market place to men who haggle and often at a loss," remarked one of a group of fisherwomen standing on the shore.

"Pooh-pooh!" sniffed another, who was none other than the formidable Karuppayi,

condemned to be chaste as an ugly woman ;  
"she was flaunting her body before the pur-  
chasers."

"Oh, why be jealous of her? She is born  
lucky," cried a third.

"And she is non-interfering and gentle of  
speech," chimed in a fourth.

"Cease your chatter," bellowed Karuppayi ;  
"soon you will be calling her *Mari Amman*."

"What are you talking about?" now  
broke in a deep-toned masculine voice. "Even  
if all the fishes at the bottom of the sea were to  
come in the net in one haul, you will not be  
satisfied. You women are a grumbling lot."

"And all the fishes at the bottom of the  
sea will not slake your thirst for toddy," snapped  
Karuppayi, turning round briskly.

The women laughed. And Vallathan, her  
partner, found his wit nipped in the bud.

"Andayi has sold her fishes for five rupees,"  
cried Karuppayi ; "do you know that?"

"Hm," grunted Vallathan.

"And what have you, braggart, brought  
this evening? Nasty little fishes that won't  
fetch even eight annas a hundred!"

"Hear her ! Ha ha ha ! He he he ! Hu hu hu !"

"And those big, big things they have netted !"

"They will never do it again, dear," murmured Vallathan to his wife, suddenly checking his laughter. And a sinister look came over his rugged and weatherbeaten face.

#### IV

In the *kuppan*, Vallathan was the most noisy fellow. He was a vulgar swearer and a veritable drunkard, but like every other artist he had his poetic moments when he extolled in a melting jargon, toddy as ambrosia of the gods, stored by them in palm and palmyra, as a gracious gift to man, the horn of plenty to drink from and be godly as they. In the pot-house one night after a heady drink, he had actually paddled on the floor and fished with his cloth. On another occasion, the drink had led him to cry piteously for upwards half an hour on the shoulder of the old woman who sold boiled bengalgram outside the toddy-shop, and between

his sobs, he had called her his darling wife, with many a loud and tearful protestation that he would no more drink. The brine had not made him continent ; he thought he was a mighty wit and a clever woman-charmer, but his amiable spouse had given him little opportunity to charm anyone. But the brave fellow had persevered and triumphed sometimes, without very much danger to his skin.

And confident of his powers he had turned at last to Andayi. That virtuous woman was at first pained to see him behave clumsily to her and had kindly and silently ordered him to keep away ; but when he had persisted, scolded him in vexation ; and finally, in swelling indignation and contempt, had broomed him and set the dog on his heels.

"You shameless ass," she had cried, "the next time you talk like that, I'll ask my husband to twist your neck like a cock's. I am with child and in trying to outrage me in this, my holy state, you will go to the nethermost depths of hell."

To which he had laughed a malignant laugh and said :—

"I'll catch you yet, my beauty," looking at a net that sprawled like a monstrous spider on the fair soft sands ; "I'll catch you in that as I catch a fish ; and ah, how delightful it would be to watch the poor dear thing beating its tail, throbbing, and subsiding white over its belly. And you will be as silent as the fish to what I do." His fingers had crisped and itched to grasp the superb bowls of her breasts as they were wont to grasp the bowls of foaming palm-juice that inebriated ; and thought of the rape, fiercely exquisite, had brought a febrile glow in his eyes, making him cry hoarsely : "Hell or no hell, I shall have you, I shall have you, my beauty of black eyes and back hair ; resist, and I'll make it fatherless, the little thing that is cutting a caper in your accursed belly."

## V

At first she was frightened at his threats and wanted to tell her husband all about the man's shameless advances and her own wrathful repulsion, but on second thoughts, she deemed it wise not to do so as that would only be



bringing open hostility. Karuppayi was a bitterer foe than her husband; her jealousy of their affluence was a smouldering fire which only needed a scandal concerning her to fan it into a leaping flame. That termagant would turn the whole thing to her advantage and say that she, the seeming-virtuous Andayi, tried to seduce her husband, but he, the devoted Vallathan, knowing her to be a strumpet, fled from her pestilential touch. So she communed with herself in this sorry situation and tried to maintain a calm, an almost jovial aspect outside.

But courage within oneself, under such tense circumstances, cannot last long. And a moodiness was becoming visible in her face. Her husband, poor soul, thought this to be the languor of her approaching maternity, but soon finding that all was not well with her asked her one night: "What's troubling you? Something seems to weigh upon your mind."

"Nothing, nothing," she replied with a faint smile. "What's there to trouble me when you are here to protect me, with your loving brother ever by your side? But sometimes I think you will venture far into the boisterous

waters and I will not see you any more. It's not an idle thought, often it comes like a dark premonition."

"A fisherman's wife to be afraid of the sea! A thing unheard and unbelievable!" he cried laughing. "But you are trying to hide the real cause of your trouble. And you don't seem to be half as radiant as you were before."

She sighed, and with an abruptness that almost startled him, said: "Don't, oh don't be too friendly with Vallathan. He looks like some fierce bird of prey, there's such evil light in his eyes."

"How absurd! In what way can he harm me?" And he laughed again heartily which dispelled her gloom somewhat.

"In the evenings at the shore," she continued, lowering her voice to an anxious whisper, "I've seen him watch you strangely."

"My fishes!" he broke forth, "they interest him much more than me."

At this point footsteps were heard without and Kali came out of the hut.

"You are late for supper, Mari, lad," he said. "You oughtn't to have done it all at

once, the blackening of the new fishing-line. Half of it you should have kept for to-morrow, I told you so."

"That was not what detained me," he replied, and his voice trembled.

Thinking all was not well with him, Kali came close to his brother, and in the doubtful light of the crescent moon that peeped through the trees, saw a streak of blood across his face.

"You've hurt yourself," he cried, taken aback. "Tell me how." And he called out to his wife to bring a light.

"No, no," sobbed Mari, "I can't. It's wicked, too wicked."

"What is wicked, brother? What has come over you that you should behave so strangely, you who are such a sensible and plainspoken lad?"

"Tell her to go in," he whispered, pointing to his sister-in-law, "she must not hear."

Andayi was gone no sooner than she came, but she had seen blood in her brother-in-law's face and heard enough of his whispered words to make her heart flutter like leaf in the wind. Had anything dreadful happened?

Mari told all. While blackening the new fishing-cord—so absorbed was he as to forget everything around him—he had stopped to look into the pot of black to give it a stirring, and upon his ears had fallen suddenly words of such filthy scandal about them. And he had recognized the loudest voice of all as Vallathan's and amid much vulgar laughter Vallathan had remarked : ' That's why he is not marrying. Her tenderness to her husband's brother is something more than that of a sister-in-law, and Kali, poor ignorant ass, is blind to things happening under his very nose.' And he had called Mari foul abusive names at which, stealing from behind, he (Mari) had aimed a heavy blow with his paddle on the slanderer's shoulder. It had missed, and Vallathan had wounded him with the fish-hook. But Mari had shown that he was not a coward.

## VI

So scandal was already in the air. Kali felt that he was wantonly insulted and was grieved beyond measure that his virtuous wife's

name should be on the babbling tongues of drunken rascals. But he did not want to make matters worse by any impetuous act, he was for tempering violence with conciliation. So, approaching the scandalmonger, he said with a calmness that surprised himself: "Will you bear to hear anybody talk ill of your wife?"

The bluntness of the question rather irritated Vallathan and he replied: "It's my wife's business, not mine."

"But when you talk dirt of another's wife, it is her *husband's* business to tie your tongue. Do you know that?"

"Phew! You don't know how to tie a catamaran. Learn it first and then think of tying men's tongues."

"You are witty, friend, and clever too, but you bark like a despicable cur."

Vallathan's lips twitched, his nostrils dilated like those of a horse and he cried, passion choking his utterance:—

"You too want to taste of my fish-hook?"

"Cool down, cool down, Valla," suavely rejoined Kali, which only exasperated the other all the more; "as if I have no fish-hook! Toddy

has addled your head and good Karuppayi has soured you. Why did you hurt my poor brother? He has never crossed your path."

"Hurt him! I would have killed him!" shrieked Vallathan; "but I spared him for your wife, both of them pigs, to cuddle together to breed like pigs."

No man, however patient, could brook such stark insolence, and Kali began to feel a strange fire burning within him. Kind reasoning with this unmitigated scoundrel was doing injustice to a sense of justice within himself, and he said slowly as if weighing every word and with a shivering deliberateness:—

"You have a tongue that would blacken even *Mari Amman's* virtue, and I am going to cut off that tongue. You have a heart that is rottener than the rotten fish pecked at by crows by the seaside, and I am going to scoop out that heart. If you want to save them mend your ways. Mend before it is too late."

At this Vallathan hawked from the very pit of his stomach and spat out curses and abuse that darted pell-mell like pebbles down a mountain torrent; burning the pedigree of Kali

with sulphurous profanity, calling his sister to be his concubine, and running in the same gamut through the rest of his female relatives, not omitting his own wife, then shaking his fist and ending in a staccato bark : "I'll kill you for what you have said, I'll kill you." And he thought of Andayi's brooming him and her dog barking at his heels when he ran a race for life one evening and escaped battering his skull against a cocoanut tree.

## VII

The idea of setting fire to their hut first crossed the ruffian's mind but when it began to crystallize he wished he had not thought of it, for fire in one hut meant fire in the whole *kuppam*. Most of the fisher-folk knew that he nourished a deep hatred for the two brothers, but the real cause of the hatred they were not aware of. They lent ears to his wicked words, and that too over friendly pots, but were themselves not wicked. If Andayi were to tell them of his advances to her, of his diabolic threats when she repulsed him, they surely would believe

her and suspicion would be fastened on him. And they would be loud to one man that his wife set him to do the deed.

So he thought of another plan and seemed to derive a grim satisfaction from it.

## VIII

Though the morning had begun brightly changes were noticed in the mid-day sky. It was growing dull like a vapour-blown mirror and round the horizon little clouds were forming into a large girdle of shadows. And the wind that was waking little waves to chase one another died gradually in the distances, and the restless finny drove began to scuttle in the same direction—sure sign, the fishermen knew, of the approaching storm. And rapidly they rowed toward the shore.

Kali and Mari had gone a little farther than the others; in that part of the watery waste their catamaran floated solitarily. Seeing the changes overhead and those corresponding over the surface of the waters, Kali said to his brother:

“Mari, you can't mistake that sob in the



wind and the curl in the crests of the waves. We shall haul in the net and lines and paddle ashore quick."

The brothers strained every muscle to the work ; they dragged the net, the wooden blocks attached to its fringes and floating scattered in a vast parabola, narrowing and finally clustering about a heap of dragged coils through whose meshes the fishes lying on their bellies gleamed like silver ingots ; they rolled the sail and tied it fast at the top and tail of the catamaran for the storm was gathering to tear it to tatters ; then thrust the ravelled lines each against the cord bound about his waist—all this during the brief torpor that had settled over the waters, and tightened their grips on the paddles.

"I don't see another catamaran anywhere near," said Kali, breaking the silence.

"They've been quick against the foul weather, seem to have run with the wind before the calm," replied the younger.

And scarcely had he said so when he espied to his left, at a fishing-line's cast, a catamaran buoying up. "There's one to keep us company," he exclaimed.

It came nearer and the brothers saw Vallathan.

"O—ho!" cried the fellow jovially, "I'm lucky indeed. In this louring weather I was afraid of being alone. Now I've found help."

The brothers wondered at his openness, the absence in him of the least sign of enmity towards them; they thought he was trying to be good at last and wanting to be friends with them.

"We too are lucky, Valla," said Kali happily, "row nearer so that we can hitch our catamarans together. That will be safer."

"No, no. I'm safe enough being near you."

"Then let it be."

They rowed on. Kali cut jokes with Vallathan and talked to him freely, now lost in the bottom of a trough of grey-green waters, now rising on the comb of a snow-white wave; but Mari could not bring his mind to trust the fellow who had mongered such detestable scandal and hurt him wantonly. Perhaps he had become apparently reconciled the better to slake his vengeful thirst, the hardened scoundrel

that he was, by some malevolent plan best known to himself. Else why had he come alone? Why was he thrusting his friendship on them? Why had his brother not asked him anything about this sudden good humour of his? These were the thoughts that kept recurring in his mind, and he determined to be on his guard.

The dead cyclop's eye that was the sun was now hurled out of view by the shoulder of a cloud scurrying from the west to thicken the tenebrous banks all over the concave; in the gloom, plumbago at first, but condensing swiftly to the tone of the clouds, the waves had phalanxed into walls and begun to thrash; and in the valleys between smashed and torn by the wind the foam flew in endless flakes and tufts.

There was an hour's row more to the shore.

"Look!" cried Vallathan suddenly, pointing in the direction of the Harbour; "smoke, thick thick smoke, and flames too! Seems the oil-tanks are ablaze!"

Kali and Mari simultaneously stopped paddling and turned their eyes thither, but the latter, with the intuitive consciousness of coming evil,

as sudden turned round, and in one fleeting moment saw Vallathan's face convulsed uglily and murder shining in his eyes. He had dropped the oar and was poising over his head a big granite stone—the stone that is tied to the crook-end of a stick that serves the purpose of an anchor to cast and fish in calm waters—ready to hurl it on his head. Mari screamed a wild scream, Kali turned back startled, and what he saw the next moment froze him with glacial horror ; the stone had come hurtling down on his brother's head and precipitated him into the gigantic turmoil of the waters. A crimson patch spreading and fading as sudden where he sank told Kali that the fall of the stone had proved fatal. And the sound of a well-known laugh, fiendish in its malignity, coming cleaving through the waves, now galvanized him into life ; with a hoarse cry of maddened grief he turned and looked at Vallathan, and even as he looked, a mountainous wave poised Vallathan's catamaran on its writhing crest ; the lashes unfastened, the detached logs spun recklessly, and clawing his hands violently into the gloom, the murderer disappeared amid the seething foam.

The tempest howled, the billows roared, and in that maelstrom of warring winds and waters a passionate cry was heard : "*I owe my life to you, my dearest, dearest brother !*"

The sea refused to deliver up the dead. It kept the murder on its bosom a secret, among the many secrets it kept through centuries of change and changelessness. Here along the shore the sea murmurs to the sands through veils of fluttering foam ; raves sadly or sullenly ; but the secrets lie whence even the mightiest tempest cannot tear them away. Here nature is unravished ; in shine and scent and sound she is as pure as she was before life with its fever and fret appeared on this little planet.

## IX

While walking along the beach one evening, now a couple of years ago, while sunset was folding its golden wings over the sands and sea, I happened on a group of people watching the building of a catamaran. Two of the logs lay fashioned already, spruce and of the cool colour of roses ; the carpenter was working on the third

log, and for every stroke of his axe a chunk like raw flesh fell out ; and the last limb of the pretty mountain *neem* that had once wound the moon in her tresses and whistled with the wind to the stars, and cut for the slenderness and straightness of her spine, lay almost hidden by a dune which a steady wind was dwindling.

"That axe needs a little sharpening, it is crushing the wood and not cutting," I heard a voice speaking to the carpenter, and its familiar ring drew me to look whence it came. And sure as I thought, it was Kali ; he too happening to look where I stood, our eyes met and he detached himself from the group and came up to me.

"You are growing more and more to the shape of your paddle, Kali. How's this ?" I remarked.

"It's so ever since the lad went," he replied, lifting dolorous eyes. "I didn't go fishing for a month after that fateful evening I lost him forever, I was so sick and prostrate. But what's a fisherman's life without the sea ? I've got my wife's brother now to help me. But it's different, oh, so different ! That's he,"

pointing to a young muscular fellow of twenty squatting on his heels ; " that's he and that's the catamaran we are building to put out to sea, we hope, by the end of this week. We've made the proper offerings to the gods to hallow the new thing."

He then looked toward the Marina Pavement as if to look for the lad's approach as of old—habit combined with the warmth of memory was in that look—and I wondered to see his face suddenly brightening. And wondering, I turned my eyes after him and saw a woman coming skirting the Aquarium, with a child on her hip and an urchin by her side. And behind her trotted a dog, now pawing the sands and fishing out a rag and worrying it, now running round and round, nosing and tongueing the fishscales that shone like bits of mica (it was the season when fishes were dried for the winter), pricking up his ears, and lifting his muzzle. The urchin called angrily to him to behave. And he came with the tail between his legs and the look that established the simile. I gazed on interested.

Kali rushed forward, almost snatched the

child from the woman, and holding it between his arms ran back to me.

"Little Mari!" he cried, his face expanding into a joyous smile whilst the sturdy two-year-old kicked at his chest with the force latent in a tamer of the sea.

Andayi stood a little away, watching with pride the rebelliousness of little Mari.

"Very like *him*! Very like *him*! Is he not?" cried, Kali hugging the child to his bosom.

The fisherman's childlike delight, sacred in its simplicity, went straight to my heart. The image of his noble brother which he seemed to see in the babe had proved a lasting solace to him!



## THE CRADLE

FROM hooks of iron that had not known the touch of oil since they were driven into a beam of the parlour ceiling the cradle was slung by ropes, a very old cradle made of Burma teak. It was a bit crazy at the four corners ; from one of its flanks a few carved bars had fallen out, and the gap, which resembled a mouth with the front teeth missing, was covered by a piece of deal nailed fast to the frame. But though decrepit it had a personality, rubbed smooth and shiny as it was by the tender limbs of infancy ; through the years child after child had muled and puked in its bosom ; and as it now hung

still and empty it seemed to dream of the vivid and varied spirits of those it had borne and rocked.

A young woman sat gazing at the cradle. In appearance she was about twenty-eight; in reality, six years younger. She was far gone with child; her eyes which were fixed upon the cradle were not expressive of the delicious languor of her state, they were full of a strange indignation. Presently, she transferred her look to a picture on the wall; indignation died and the eyes had back again their dark and natural loveliness. It was a Ravi Varma picture—Yasoda milking the cow and baby Krishna, plump, bejewelled, and smiling, leaning against her back, his arms round her neck.

A dream became audible at once. The picture shed manna on her memory and she returned to the beatitude of a certain day in her sixteenth year. She had felt giddy and vomitted and complained of a sick headache to her husband's aunt, a kindly woman, who having no daughters of her own and bored with the monotony of seeing boys' dresses in the clothesbox and on the clothesline—she had five

sons—lavished all her love upon her. She had prayed for a daughter but she was past child-bearing.

"It's no sick headache, my dear," she had said.

"What's it then?" Kalyani had insisted on knowing the cause of the nausea.

For answer, gently taking her by the arm, the aunt had led her to the picture, touched the figure of baby Krishna, telling how divinely beautiful he was, and whispered something in her ear. Joy and embarrassment had made Kalyani blush the ruby red of a rose, and the aunt saying, "It is going to be a boy and he will be as beautiful as our darling little lord," had smiled intimately into her shyly smiling eyes. And the days, the months following, had built an enchanted world of blossoms and bird-song; she had been in a passion of tenderness for everybody, had felt a desire to eat sweet things and listen to sweet talk, and it did one's heart good to see her then, said the neighbouring girls.

And before the baby came she had bought the cradle from a widow for two rupees and

eight annas—she couldn't afford to have a new one, and the offer had come in quite handy. This was six years ago although her mind measured the span as yesterday; the boy was succeeded by two little girls but none of them were now alive. Whooping cough, measles, scarlet fever, and an array of other infantile ailments lay in ambush.

The cradle hung empty.

From the picture Kalyani looked back at it and her eyes flashed white. It seemed to mock the childless emptiness of her days, hanging there so mutely, callously; out of its sleepy hollow leaped the lovely eidolons of her dead young ones, and she saw them, ah, happy sight!—with the beaded bubbles of milk winking on their rosy lips, kicking their rosy feet, stretching their rosy hands, soft little hands, softer than the dove's deep-damask'd wings; heard them crowing, croodling, ululating! Her eyes became misted, the scene dissolving musically away into the dim arches of the years; the next instant they flashed white again, for the news she had heard that morning rang wildly like wild bells in her ears.

*A child had died in that cradle !*

It was dismal. "I am telling you," the woman who knew the widow who had sold the cradle to her had said, "because it has been a sore load on my mind since I knew it. Seshi's daughter-in-law was a very vain girl. She used to spend hours before the mirror admiring her beauty, and the more she looked in the mirror, as the saying goes, the less she looked to the house. She never gave even so much as a look toward the kitchen where her old mother-in-law toiled day after day, but sat dreaming about new fashions in dress and jewellery, the cut of the blouse and the colour of the sari, of eardrops in gems and filigree gold, of the coiffure of film stars, and the latest brand of hair-oil and face-cream and powder in the market. She almost worshipped these cheap women of the screen, even openly expressed her admiration of them and of their life of ease and freedom and gaiety. Pardon me for putting such things into your chaste ears, indeed I myself don't like this digression, only I wanted to show you my utter abhorrence for all this newfangled nonsense called progress and advancement. My poor

heart bleeds to see the way in which our quiet and happy home-life has been broken and polluted ; and more's the pity, some of the elderly folks themselves acquiescing in such pollution. If only my son permits and gives me a little money, I will this moment journey to Benares to die there and mingle my bones and ashes in the holy Ganges. (Here quite overcome, she closed her eyes and apostrophized Siva to avert a total annihilation of the world.). Well, 'to come back to Seshi's daughter-in-law, she had a way with her husband, who, poor fellow, danced to her tune, quite like the performing bear. When she gave birth to her first child she did not find any great pleasure or pride in maternity ; the little thing was a nuisance, she told her friends, it never gave her a moment of peace. And she did not suckle the baby, she feared that her firm young breasts would lose their shapeliness if she gave suck. Slipping and sliding like gourds while you are still a girl—we could read her bold thought. The baby drew its milk from the bottle and when it cried, not out of hunger but peeved awfully, she put it in the cradle, inserted a rubber nipple with a silver

disc-guard into its mouth, and went about gadding into the neighbouring homes, and with her aggressive talk making the meekest of girls a rebel in her house. To cut a long story short, one day, the child, poor neglected mite, swallowed the nipple, silver disc and all, choked, and died without even a whimper. It was quite a healthy baby, and we all wondered what it was that had brought about its sudden death—and then, Seshi told me, bidding me keep the secret, while the others talked angrily of diarrhoea. Her daughter-in-law grew strangely silent after the unfortunate happening; gone, gone with the wind were her gay, irresponsible laughter and imperious talk; and the cradle was sold to you when her son got himself transferred to a *moffusil* office. With a guilty conscience his wife could not stay in the City."

The cradle hung empty.

A child had died in that; it was accursed, it had caused the death of more children, her darling ones, one after another. But it would *not* any more, Kalyani hissed, her face sizzling with anger. Rising up she gave it a violent push and it struck with a bang and a rattle

against the wall. She stood panting and in the rebound the cradle hit her savagely on the knees ; it spun and squealed sinisterly, then frowned with all the blackness of a Burman forest whence its timber had been cut.

Kalyani could not bear the sight of it, the glittering leer of its bars, the crazy creak of its joints. And with the help of the maidservant, she untied the knots of ropes and threw it into the dark of the lumber room.

A year after, on a certain day, when she had a new wicker cradle and was rocking her baby to the tune of a lullaby, Kalyani was called by the maidservant to the backyard of the house. The maid had entered the lumber room for a handful of ashes to scour the vessels and had looked into the cradle, for it was in her mind for long, as her mistress had no use for it, to ask her if she would let her have it ; she was expecting the confinement of her daughter shortly.

“Look,” she said, pointing to the cradle, genuinely astonished, and Kalyani saw inside a pair of kittens white as driven snow. Their eyes were not as yet open to the light of the



world ; uttering a little moan of delight, she lifted them out tenderly, handfuls of driven snow.

“ Mi-aaaow ! ” rang a sudden snarling cry, and the mother cat took a flying leap from the beam of the ceiling onto the parapet near by, its dappled fur ruffled, ears flattened, tail lashing from side to side, and fixed Kalyani with its deepset yellow eyes, sharp with mistrust and burning like topazes in the bottom of a mine. And its pose held the threat of incarnating into the larger of its species, the tiger, if only to pounce upon her as on an woodland prey, to tear her limb from limb and glut itself with her streaming blood. The gesture, however, was more terrifying than the suggestive metamorphosis, and a look of sidelong contempt which on a human face might have been a distortion only added to its feline grace and dignity.

“ Why did you disturb the poor things ? ” the maid asked.

“ Because I didn’t want them to die,” replied Kalyani in a tone of anguish. For such is the miracle of motherhood, its matchless benevolence.

“Why should they die?”

She did not answer. And she saw the mother cat, its young ones dangling from its mouth, pass and disappear over the roof of the adjacent house.

“It won’t come again,” she whispered to herself, amazed at seeing how proud even a brute was of its motherhood, its suspicion of mankind, and its instinct ever alert to protect its young. Suddenly, a strange but congruous thought compelling, she dragged out the cradle which was thick with dust and dirt and muffled half with sticky spiderweb. She then leaned it against the wall and while she was about to withdraw her hands, it toppled down and the stem of one of its iron hooks projecting caught the runaway end of her sari and tore it with a purr. The cradle smarted under the touch of her who had humiliated it and cast it away where air and light and infant limbs were not, and its derelict heart blazed fiercely, its rusty fang thrust out to furrow her flesh.

Seeing the look of loathing on her mistress’s face the maidservant asked :—

“Why not give the cradle to me if you

have no use for it? I've been asking you these many months."

There was no answer again.

Next morning the maidservant entered the backyard of the house. The first thing her eye sought for was the cradle and the first thing her eye missed was the cradle. Strange! She stood there scanning every nook and shadow when her mistress came to her.

"What are you looking for?"

"Where is it?"

"The cradle?"

"Yes."

"There!"

The maidservant turned her look in the direction pointed out by her mistress, it alighted upon a heap of charred wood and ashes.

"I wanted it for my grandchild," she said, her voice faintly reproachful.

"I wanted your grandchild to live like this chubby child of mine," she replied, kissing her baby's cheeks and looking ardently into its eyes.

"I don't understand."

"Well, take this money and buy a new cradle for your coming grandchild. I cremated

this cradle before it tried to cremate more children. I bought it of a widow ; it was the grave of a child to whom its mother refused her milk lest she might lose her beauty, it has been the grave of three of my children." And in the hands of the incredulous maid Kalyani placed the little money she had put by for some months in the domestic exchequer.

The liberality of her mistress rendered the maid mute with gratitude, and in the sea of light and loving-kindness that billowed out of her eyes, she dreamed she saw her grandchild already born and lullabied.